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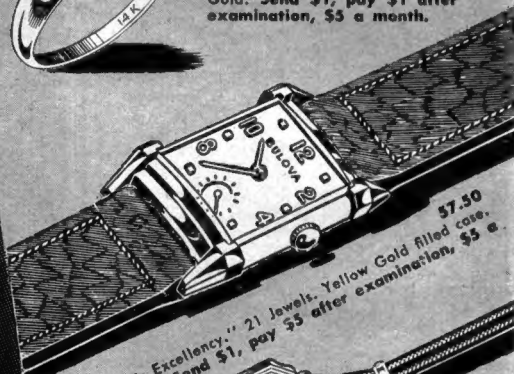
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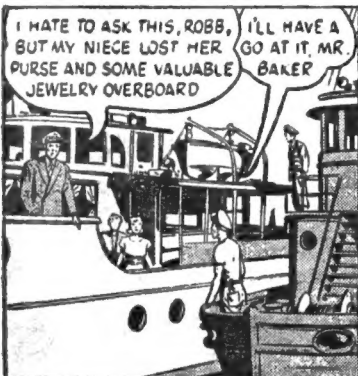
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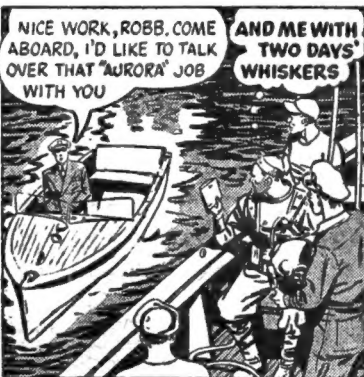


WHAT LUCK! I'VE FOUND IT



NICE WORK, ROBB. COME ABOARD, I'D LIKE TO TALK OVER THAT "AURORA" JOB WITH YOU

AND ME WITH TWO DAYS' WHISKERS



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ALL STORIES NEW

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Vol. 20

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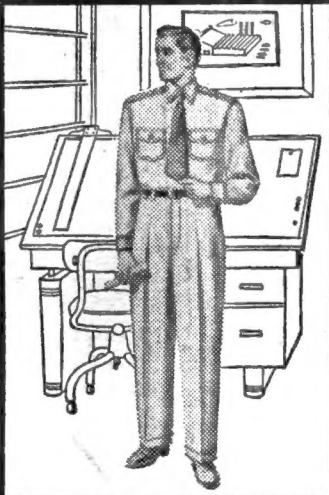
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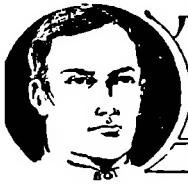
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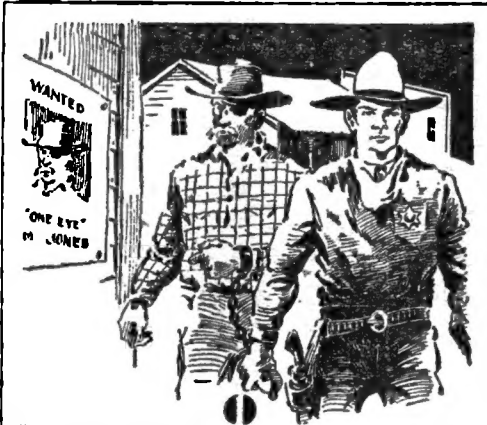
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TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



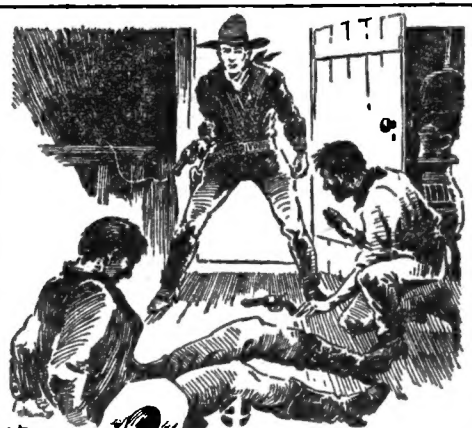
In 1873, when Jack Ellis was a deputy sheriff of Apache County, Arizona, he gained a reputation for resourcefulness and bravery that caused many an outlaw to give that neck of the woods a wide berth. One day's record may explain the reason why malo hombres found Ellis so very discouraging.



When the five Lawless Lawlor brothers rode into Concho City, two of them gave rein to their exuberance by starting to wreck a Chinese restaurant. Ellis was eating there at the time. He used the three-legged stool on which he had been sitting, to teach them good manners. After which he jailed them.

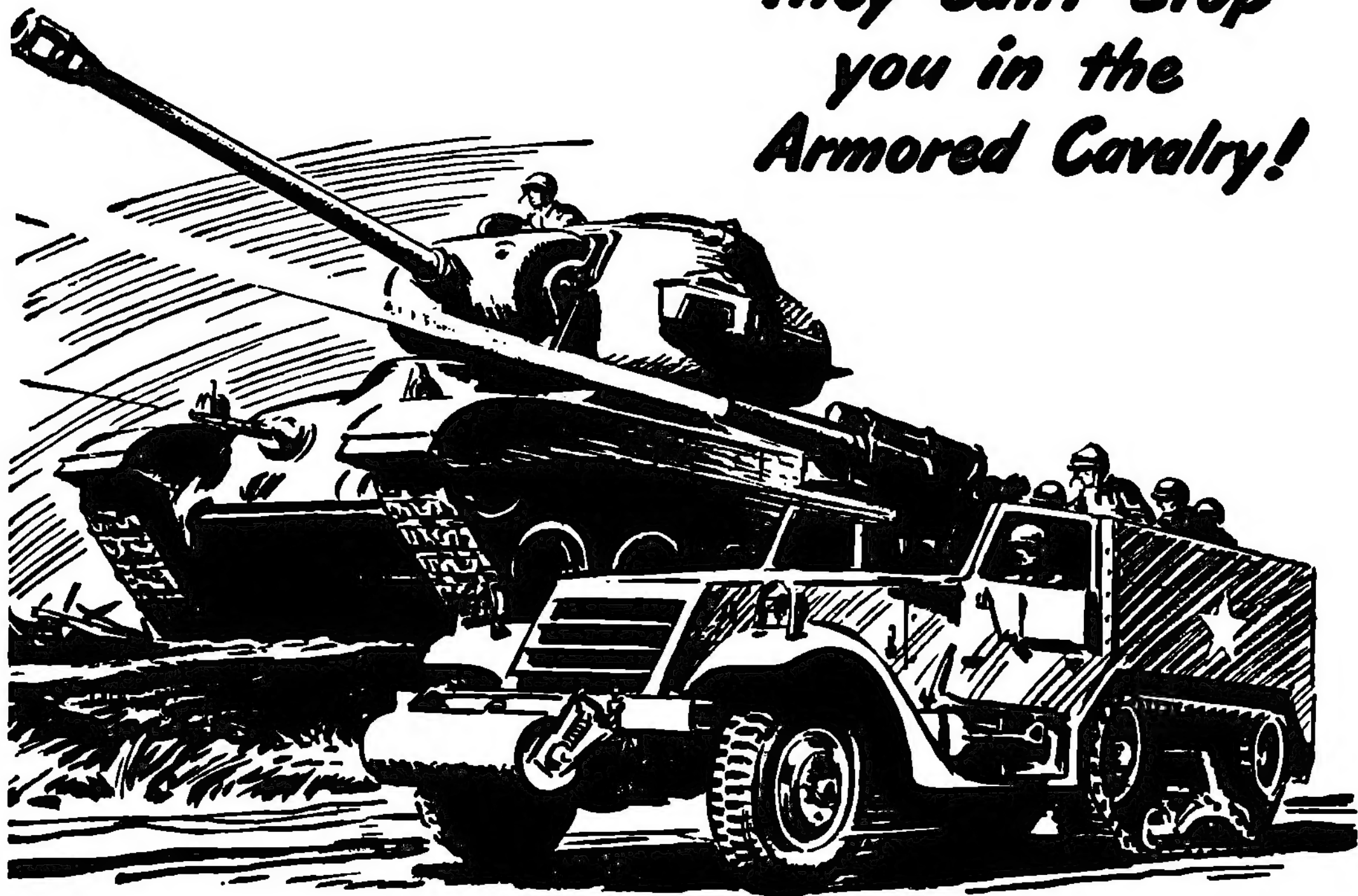


This peeved the other three Lawlors, one of whom took a pot shot at Ellis as he emerged from the hoosegow. Jack's reply took the murderous bully just above the belt buckle, so that he lost interest in the affray...but permanently. The remaining two brothers holed up in a honky-tonk.



The deputy was now joined by several irate citizens, and together they poured a heavy barrage into the outlaws' temporary fort. But the Lawlors were all savage fighting men, and held off their enemies till sunset. Then Ellis made a detour, crashed through a rear door and killed the brothers at close quarters.

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The Hand-Gun Hurricane

By
Philip Ketchum



That one noose, filled with an innocent man, brought stark terror to those God-fearing Rincon cowmen. . . . And sent Bill Cameron, alone, up the risky, twisting trail that could end only in the hell of snarling bushwhack lead—or in a command invitation to join his friend in the grisly Dead Man's Prance!

CHAPTER ONE

Cottonwood Quadrille

THEY caught Lou Matheney in the Tiburon hills. They dealt with him swiftly. Jeff Russell, who headed the crowd which ran him down, gave him



He rode out of their corral driving their remuda before him.

a chance to make a final statement, and Matheney knew what he faced. He knew there was no escape. He declared his innocence of the charge against him and he cursed these men who had taken him. He died there as he had lived. Hard and bitterly.

Bill Cameron heard what had happened when he rode into Ludlow. He heard the story from the man at the corral who took charge of his horse, from Ed Burlingame at the store and from Sam Lowry, who worked for Russell and who had seen

Matheney die. Lowry gave his version of the hanging as they stood at the bar in the Rincon saloon where Lowry was apparently trying to drown in alcohol his memory of what had happened. He was already more than a little drunk.

"Get out of the park, Cameron," he said thickly. "Get out in a hurry. You may be next."

Bill Cameron made no answer. He nursed his drink and stared thoughtfully into the back-bar mirror. His face, reflected there, was thin, angular. The

sober expression on it showed something of the concern he felt. Sam Lowry might have had too much to drink but there was a basis for his warning and Bill could understand it. A month ago, at the onset of his father's illness, Jeff Russell had assumed control of the Russell ranch. Dealing with Jeff Russell wasn't like dealing with Reb, his father. There was a harsh, ruthless drive in Jeff Russell which his father had never possessed, and Jeff was arrogant, ill-tempered and quick to explode into violence. There might be troublesome days ahead.

Bill finished his drink. He turned away and stood for awhile on the porch of the Rincon saloon, a tall, lean man, deeply worried by what he had heard and by what he knew. In the past few weeks, half a dozen of the older men who had worked for old Reb Russell had drifted on and had been replaced by a crew of shifty eyed riders who looked more like gun-hands than men who could deal with cattle. There had been several shooting affrays in town. There was a growing tension throughout this entire mountain park.

Chris Herwig came along the street and stopped at Bill's side. Herwig owned a ranch in the north east end of the park next to Bill's. He was still under thirty, not so tall as Bill and a little heavier. His usually pleasant face was wrinkled into a scowl.

"What do you think of it, Bill?" he demanded.

"Probably what you do," Bill answered.

Herwig stared off toward the mountains. "Matheney wasn't much good," he said slowly. "Maybe he was no good at all, but even at that he deserved a trial, not a sudden hanging without a chance in the world to defend himself."

Bill Cameron nodded. His glance ranged up and down the street. There was a good crowd in town this afternoon, for most of the men who had ridden with

Jeff Russell had come back here with him after the hanging. Three of his men were grouped in front of the Tiburon saloon. They were three who were new to the park. One, a short heavy-set fellow with a dark, scowling face, Bill had heard referred to as Dave Taub. He didn't know the names of the others. Two more of Russell's men stood up the street near the hotel. Bill had a sudden, uneasy feeling and this annoyed him and deepened the frown on his face.

"We ought to get together, all of us little fellow's," Herwig suggested. "If we stood together we might have a chance."

"It hasn't come to that, Chris," Bill said slowly. "Jeff Russell has made no move against any of us."

"Do you think he won't?" Chris flared. "How do things stack up here in the park? South of town there's one big ranch, owned by John Banning. North of town there's one big ranch, Russell's. There are a dozen small places on the Rincon flats and along the Tiburon hills. Russell will never be satisfied until he is as big a man in the north park as John Banning is in the south."

Nora Loft turned into the street from the river road and came riding past the saloon. She called a greeting to Bill Cameron and Chris Herwig. In front of the hotel she pulled up and swung lightly to the ground. She was a tall, slender girl with dark hair and dark, flashing eyes and was as spirited as the horses she raised. She wore jeans, a man's shirt and coat and a low-crowned hat. A gun was belted at her waist. She knew how to use it.

"Nora is the only one I ever knew who really faced Jeff Russell and told him off," Chris Herwig said reflectively.

"She's told some others off, too," Bill mentioned.

Herwig grinned. He said, "Me once, to be honest. She doesn't have much use

for men. And that's sure a shame."

NORA entered Burlingame's store and Bill thought of heading that way to speak to her but he made no motion to leave. There was little point, he decided, in raking over dead ashes. The old relationship between him and Nora was a thing of the past and had best be left that way.

Ruth Parker's dressmaking establishment was next to the hotel and the door to it suddenly opened and Ellen Russell came out. As she stood indecisively on the street Bill heard Chris Herwig draw in a long, slow breath. He could sense the tension which had come into Herwig's body. He gave the man a quick look, remembering Herwig's interest in Ellen Blake before she had married Jeff Russell. Herwig's lips made a thin, tight line across his face. His eyes were stormy.

Ellen Russell crossed over toward the lot near the stage station where the Russell wagon had probably been hitched. She was a slender, small woman. She wore a long dress, dark jacket, wide brimmed hat, and she held herself proudly erect. Bill had known her rather well before she married Jeff Russell. Since then, he had hardly seen her.

"Let's have a drink," Herwig said suddenly.

Bill shook his head and after Herwig entered the saloon he moved slowly up the street. He stopped at the stage station to ask for mail and he met John Banning there. He talked to Banning for a few moments. Banning was a tall, grey haired man with an easy smile and friendly manner. They moved outside together and Banning headed for the store while Bill stood on the street and glanced through the mail he had received, none of which was important.

He turned back to the feed store and when he came out he saw Jeff Russell in front of the Tiburon saloon, talking to the

men who had been standing there. Russell was a tall man, heavy. He was beginning to get fat though he was no older than Bill. He had broad, thick shoulders, long arms. His face was round and ruddy. He was usually scowling to back up the dark, sharp look in his eyes. He had turned, now, and was staring toward Bill but he didn't wave or make any motion at all.

Bill had one more errand in town and he started toward the store but he had taken only a few steps when he heard Russell calling him.

"Hey, Cameron!" Russell shouted. "Come here a minute!"

A sudden, chilly apprehension ran over Bill Cameron's body. He came to an abrupt stop and stared toward Russell and the crowd with him. Russell's voice had been sharp, commanding. It went against every impulse Bill had to answer such a summons, yet facing Jeff Russell was something he couldn't dodge, and he knew it. He wasn't just one of the small ranchers with whom Russell might be annoyed. There existed between them an old antagonism dating back to a fight they had had as boys, an antagonism which hadn't been improved with the years. A challenge such as this was one he couldn't ignore.

"Come here," Russell called again. "I want to see you a minute."

Bill's lips tightened. He nodded slightly and started toward the Tiburon saloon. With each step he took he could feel the building up of the tension in his body. Back of him, Nora Loft and John Banning came out of the store. Nora had been laughing at something but suddenly she stopped. Her eyes fastened on Bill and the men in front of the Tiburon saloon. Chris Herwig came out of the Rincon saloon. He saw what was happening and stiffened against the wall of the building, one of his hands hovering close to his gun.

Bill Cameron didn't notice any of this, but he saw the way Russell's men had spread out. He marked the narrow way they were watching him. He could see, too, the harsh, bold look in Russell's eyes. He knew this was to be no casual talk.

"I want to know what you think about what happened to Matheney?" Russell said bluntly as he came up. "Maybe you don't approve."

Here was an unveiled, deliberate bid for trouble and Bill had a feeling he couldn't walk away from it, no matter what he answered. Russell's face looked more flushed than usual. He had probably had several drinks and was feeling them.

"Well, what have you got to say?" Russell insisted.

Bill moved closer. "I've got this to say," he answered, quietly. "You hung a man without giving him a fair trial. I call it murder."

Jeff Russell stiffened, his hand moving close to his gun. "You call it murder?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes, and if you want to reach for that gun, reach for it," Bill's voice had grown stronger. "You never were as fast as me and you know it, Russell. Maybe one of your men could get me but that wouldn't help you any. You'd be dead."

There wasn't a sound on the street. Russell's body was still rigid. The men on either side of him waited tensely for some signal from him indicating what they were to do. This hadn't been planned, Bill was sure. Backed by these men Russell had felt safe in running a bluff, in making him crawl. Russell had never expected so direct an answer.

THE MAN'S eyes had narrowed and he was breathing heavily. Perspiration showed on his forehead and around his lips. Bill could sense the struggle which was going on in his mind as he tried to size things up. Russell had never

been awfully fast with his gun. He couldn't be sure he would be fast enough to live.

Bill watched the man closely, knowing he had no chance at all if Russell decided to take the risk. He could see a resolution growing in the man's eyes and then could see it waver.

Nels Underhill, the sheriff, had come out of the saloon and suddenly Underhill spoke, his voice a little high, a little strained.

"I want no trouble here, Cameron. I want no trouble in Ludlow."

Here was a way out and Russell seized on it. The stiffness went out of his body. His hand fell away from his gun. "Hanging Matheney was no murder," he said, and his voice was still hoarse. "We were a sheriff's posse."

Cameron shook his head. "Even a sheriff's posse has no authority to hang a man. I still call it murder."

"I want no trouble here, Cameron," Underhill said again.

Bill Cameron glanced toward the sheriff. That one statement, he thought, completely characterized Nels Underhill. Nels Underhill wanted no trouble. He would play along with the strong side. He would compromise any ideal he had for the sake of a shaky peace.

Bill shrugged his shoulders. He looked at Jeff Russell and saw the undying hatred in the man's eyes. He looked at the others in this group, gun-fighters who could be bought for a price. He glanced at the sheriff. He knew that any chance of avoiding trouble was gone. Russell would not forget this or the way he had to back down. He could blame the sheriff's interference, but he knew, and every man here knew that the sheriff hadn't stopped a fight. This knowledge would work in him with the bitterness of a poison.

"Next time, Russell," Bill said dryly, "Plan your play before you make it. Plan it the way you planned the murder of

Lou Matheney—but be sure you're right."

As he said this he swung on his heel and headed directly across the street toward the Rincon saloon, every muscle in his back tensed against the possible shock of a bullet. He saw Chris Herwig standing near the saloon door, one hand still near his gun, and he knew then that Herwig had been ready to back him up and he had a sudden, warm feeling for the man. Sam Lowry had just come out of the saloon and was looking at him owlshly. Bill Cameron brushed past Lowry into the saloon.

He angled to the bar and leaned against it, feeling his first conscious reaction to what he had done. He couldn't be sure how narrow a margin it was by which he still lived, but he had been close to death there in the street and perhaps he was still close to death. He ordered a drink and took it all at once and then leaning there, tried to face in his mind just what he was up against.. It wasn't a pretty picture. There was no hope in it for him, at all. It wasn't just Jeff Russell about whom he had to worry for Russell didn't play that way. It was Jeff Russell and all the men at his command and there were no fair rules which such men lived by.

THE SUN slid down behind the Rincon mountains and an early darkness settled quickly over the park. Bill Cameron sat at one of the tables in the Rincon saloon, still turning this situation over in his mind. Chris Herwig had come in and joined him. Excitement showed in Herwig's face.

"You can't take him on alone, Bill," Herwig insisted. "You won't have to. There are plenty of us to stand behind you. I'll get to the rest of the men. We'll have a meeting at my place tomorrow night."

Bill shook his head. "Keep out of it, Chris. "Let's see what happens. Let's

see how far Jeff Russell will really go."

"You know how far he will go."

"You can't kick the law in the face, not even the kind of a law Underhill represents."

"We'll get no help from Underhill."

Dave Taub came into the saloon accompanied by two others who rode for Jeff Russell. Taub's dark, scowling glance circled the room, hesitating briefly at Bill's table. He said something to the other two men. All three stared briefly at Bill and Chris Herwig and turned and left the saloon.

Bill Cameron frowned. The visit of these three men was like a sudden, cold blast of air. There might be no meaning in it at all, yet the inference of danger was there, as plainly as though it had been stated.

"I meant to tell you," Herwig said under his breath. "After you walked in here, Russell called 'em aside, said something to 'em and left 'em here."

Bil wondered if the three men would be waiting outside when he left, waiting somewhere in the darkness. There was a good chance of it, he knew. Russell was gone. His men could shoot someone down and Russell could disclaim all responsibility for what had happened. He could even be terribly sorry.

The front door opened again and Nora Loft came in. She headed directly for his table. The bartender looked a little surprised at the presence of a woman in the saloon. Two men at the bar turned around and stared. Even Chris Herwig showed his amazement as he got to his feet and nodded.

"Hello, Chris," Nora said. And then, "Hello, Bill. I've been waiting in town to see you but was afraid you were never coming out of here."

She pulled out a chair and sat down and Bill, who had stood up, dropped back in his chair again. He grinned at her. He said, "Hello, Nora. I would have,

been out in another minute or two."

Nora's throat and face had a deep tan and there was a warm friendly light in her eyes. She looked at the bottle and glasses on the table.

"What does a woman do when she comes into a place like this?" she asked. "It would be terrible to ask for a drink, wouldn't it?"

Bill Cameron was still grinning. He said, "Terrible. A good woman doesn't come into a place like this. Your reputation is ruined, Nora."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "It's been ruined before. People said a woman couldn't run a ranch. I've been running one for almost three years. Bill, I've got some of the finest young colts back there in the hills you'd ever want to see."

It was a long time since Bill Cameron had been to Nora's ranch back in the Tiburon hills. He nodded his head, recalling two of the stallions she had and some of the brood mares.

"Bill, when are you heading for home?" Nora asked.

"Pretty soon." Bill said evasively.

"Aren't you ready to leave now?"

"Just about."

"Ride with me a ways, will you? There's something I want to talk to you about."

Bill Cameron looked straight into the girl's eyes. "You're not worried about those men outside, are you?"

Nora bit her lips. "What men?"

"How would it be," Bill asked, "If I met you up at the stable in a few minutes?"

Nora looked at Chris Herwig. She shook her head, then turned to Bill Cameron. "They're outside Bill," she said quietly. "Two are in back of the saloon. When I came in here one man was across the street in the shadows next to the barber shop. You'll not take more than two steps after you move out to the street. You won't get that far if you use the

back door. They'll nail you in the light of the door as you step through it."

"It wouldn't make much difference if you were along."

"It might, Bill. You were always stubborn. Use your head just this once. I had the man at the stable saddle your horse. It's tied with mine, back of the bank. If we could get that far we could get away."

"You go there and wait for me."

Nora's arms were resting on the table. Her hands were clenched. Tears showed in her eyes. "You're so stubborn, Bill," she said swiftly. "So terribly stubborn. Please come with me?"

Bill Cameron shook his head. "It's not stubbornness, Nora, I've got to know for sure just how far Jeff Russell means to go. I can guess, but that isn't enough. I've got to know, then I'll know what to do myself."

"If you're not killed."

Bill stood up. He said, "Two men in back, one in front. I'll take the front way. I would have anyhow."

Nora caught him by the sleeve. "No. Bill. Go with me."

Bill grinned at her, shaking his head and pulling free. He said, "Back of the bank, Nora. Soon as I can make it. Chris will walk you there."

"I'm going out when you go," Chris Herwig said grimly.

"You're going out with Nora," Bill answered. "There's only one man in front. What are you and Nora worried about?"

HE TURNED as he spoke and headed for the door. As he reached it he hesitated for just a moment, reviewing in his mind where the barber shop was located and where the man would probably be standing. His hand dropped to his gun, closing on it, drawing it from its holster. He twisted the knob of the door, pulled it open. He lunged forward, running.

Two steps took him across the porch to the street and he was halfway across the street when the first shot came. It screamed above his head. Bill marked the flash of the gun and he swung his arm up and fired in answer but it was a hurried shot and he knew he had missed.

Another shot sang past him. Running hard, Bill reached the far side of the street. He kept on down a pasageway between two buildings, circled toward the barber shop and back of it crouched in the deep shadows and waited. After a moment he heard cautious footsteps moving along the edge of the building. The footsteps reached the corner and stopped, then after a moment came on, Bill could make out the vague bulk of a man's figure heading off through the darkness to swing around and perhaps come again to the main street at a point away from the shooting.

"I'm back here," Bill called.

The man stopped. He jerked around. He fired twice in the general direction of Bill's voice and Bill's gun answered him. A hoarse cry tore from the man's throat. He took a step forward, then folded over and fell to the ground. He lay there threshing from side to side.

Bill backed away. Momentarily safe in the shadows, he waited. The man he had shot was still making noises and after a time several men from the street gathered around him. Someone leaned over him and struck a match.

"It's Duke Ames!" said a voice. "He's one of the new fellows who works for Russell."

BILL CAMERON reloaded his gun. He slid it into its holster. He mopped a hand over his face and his hand came away moist with perspiration. He had been sure of what he faced before but here was a proof which he could never question, which would never bother his conscience. He turned in the direction of

the bank and after a couple steps, paused. Taub and the other man hadn't been in that crowd. Taub and the other man might have moved back here. They might be waiting for him just as he had waited for Ames.

He squatted on his heels and tried to probe the darkness with his eyes and after a long time got up and moved on. He came up finally behind the bank and found Nora waiting there, holding her horse and his.

"I thought you were never going to get here," the girl whispered as she handed him the reins of his horse. "I knew it wasn't you who had been hit for Chris came back and told me. Just the same I worried. I kept listening for more shots."

"Where's Chris?" Bill asked.

"He's gone for his horse. He said if you came here we should ride on. He'll catch up with us."

Bill swung into the saddle. "Then let's ride, Nora. Let's see how good that nag of yours really is."

They waited for Chris Herwig where the road crossed the Rincon River. Here, near the bridge was a picnic ground, sheltered by high trees and banked on two sides by aspen. Bill remembered a school picnic they had had here many years ago and he spoke of it now.

"We were all here, do you remembre?" he asked her. "You and I and Chris Herwig and Jeff Russell. Ellen Blake who married Jeff. Kate Banning, Sam Lowry and maybe half a dozen more. What's happened to us?"

Nora shook her head. "Not much, Bill. We're older. You had a fight with Jeff the day of the picnic."

"It wasn't much of a fight."

"It sounded awful. You sat on him and beat him with your fists and Jeff screamed at the top of his lungs. I thought you were horrible. When the teacher pulled you off, Jeff's nose was bloody."

"He wasn't hurt."

"Do you remember what the fight was about, Bill?"

"Kate Banning."

Nora nodded. "In those days none of you could see anyone but Kate."

"She had the fullest lunch pail. Her mother could sure bake pies."

"There was sometimes pie in my lunch, Bill."

"But you always ate it yourself."

Nora laughed and for a time, then, both of them were silent remembering back to the days of the picnic. Bill Cameron was still trying to understand what had happened to them since then. Kate Banning had never married. He didn't know why. She was as attractive as she had ever been. Jeff Russell had married Ellen Blake, whom Chris Herwig had come to love. He and Nora had gone together for a time but after a series of temperamental clashes had broken up. Sam Lowry had drifted away and had come back a year before and gone to work for Russell.

"Do you remember what happened after the fight with Jeff?" Nora asked.

Bill shook his head.

"The teacher made you shake hands."

"There's no teacher now," Bill said slowly. "Maybe there should be."

"What can you do, Bill? This isn't just a fist fight now. A bloody nose won't end it."

Bill reached for his tobacco and papers. He rolled a cigarette, lit it, broke the match and tossed it away. There was a high, thin moon and the sky was alive with stars but there still wasn't enough light to show him the expression on Nora's face.

"Is the fight worth it?" Nora asked.

"Is the fight worth getting killed?"

"Maybe no fight is," Bill said slowly, "but there are some you can't dodge. This is one."

"You could go away. There are other places to live."

"Then some trouble might come up in

that other place and I would have to run away again. Running away is not the answer. And should I run away and leave Chris and Al Matson and all the other small ranchers to face Russell without me."

"They won't fight even if you are here, Bill. Chris will, and maybe Al Matson and maybe one or two more, but most of them will hang back and hope to keep out of it. You know they will."

Bill was afraid Nora was right. He shrugged his shoulders, accepting that possibility.

"What will you do, Bill?"

"Run for a while, I suppose. I might even drop by your place some night. Keep the coffee on, Nora." He lifted his head and listened. "Here comes someone."

IT WAS Chris Herwig and Chris had little to tell them. He hadn't seen Taub before he left town. Ames had been hit in the shoulder but from what he had heard, had a good chance of pulling through.

The three talked for a while, then Nora angled off toward the Tiburon hills and Chris and Bill Cameron kept to the road leading north. They had traveled for about an hour when a sudden, red glow spread over the sky far ahead. Even from where he was, Bill knew what that glow meant. He lifted his horse to a gallop.

"It might not be your place, Bill," Herwig called. "It's a little too far to the east."

Bill shook his head.

The red glow gradually faded from the sky. There was no sign of it when Bill and Chris Herwig topped the ridge from which they could see down into the narrow valley where Bill's ranch buildings had been located. Some of the timbers, however, were still burning and by this flickering light Bill could see how complete the destruction had been. The barn and house were both gone and his corral fence had been half torn down. There was

no ranch, no home here any more.

CHAPTER TWO

Night Riders Return

LUDLOW PARK was almost circled by the Rincon Mountains. On the eastern edge were the Tiburon hills, a lower, foothill range of the Rincons. It was close to sixty miles from the north to the south end of the park and in width it varied from half dozen miles to twenty. There were a few ranches back in the wide valleys of the Tiburon hills but not many.

Bill Cameron knew this country as a man knows the palm of his hand. He had hunted in the Rincons and through the hills. He knew each stream and its source. He knew the pools where fishing was good, the quickest way from one valley or canyon to another and which canyons had a blind end. This knowledge had come to him through his boyhood years and his early years as a man, but he had never thought that what he had learned so casually would someday be so important to him.

On the early evening of the day after his place had been burned he rode in close to the Russell ranch house, left his horse back of the barn and circled around to the front porch. Most of the men were gone. He had seen them ride off in the direction of town just before dusk. Someone would have been left here, he knew, but that was a chance he had to take.

A light showed through the window of one of the rooms. There were no other lights in the house. Bill moved along the porch to the door. He listened, but could hear nothing. After a moment he tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it and stepped into the house. Inside he could hear nothing. He turned toward the lighted room. When he got to the door he stopped.

"Come on in," said the husky voice of

Reb Russell. "I don't know who you are, but damned near anyone would be welcome."

Bill opened the door and stepped into the old man's room. Reb Russell lay flat in his bed, his long, thin body making only a slight mound under the blankets which covered him. He had a wiry grey beard and grey hair. His eyes were buried deep in a wrinkled face. There wasn't a good color to his skin.

"So it's you, huh," he grunted, staring at Bill Cameron.

Bill nodded his head.

"Jeff ain't here," said the old man, "but I reckon you know that. His wife ain't here either. She left him. She wasn't tied down to her bed like I am."

There was a tinge of bitterness in the old man's voice, the hint of an understanding which tortured him.

"If you mean to burn this place down," Reb Russell continued, "move me out first. I'll get plenty of burning after I die."

"I'm not going to burn anything," Bill answered. "How sick are you, Reb?"

"I'll never get up again," the old man said flatly. "Go ahead. Start your fire but carry me out first."

"Take charge of things again," Bill suggested, "and there won't have to be any fires."

Reb Russell shook his head. "Even if I could I wouldn't last long. What's got to happen has got to happen. I've seen this coming a long time. I would have stopped it if I could, but no one could have stopped it."

Bill bit his lips. He said, "Where's Ellen?"

"She's gone into town. She won't be back. No one tells me anything but I've got sharp ears. I hear a lot and know a lot more. Get out of the park, Bill Cameron. Get out of the park while there's still time."

Bill shook his head.

"I knew you wouldn't," Reb Russell

growled. "Some fools have to get killed to learn anything."

"Suppose you stop him, Reb. Stop him while you can."

"If anyone could have stopped him, Ellen would. She tried and failed."

Tears showed suddenly in the old man's eyes. His lips trembled. "Get out of here, Bill Cameron," he said hoarsely. "Why do you make me face things like this?"

"It's something which has to be faced," Bill answered. "He's your son."

"Get out of here."

Bill turned to the door. He had a vague appreciation of the bitterness and the pain with which Reb Russell had to live, but he couldn't know its depths. No one could but this old man himself.

Bill took one more look at Reb Russell, then stepped outside and crossed to the front door. He moved to the porch and there came to a rigid stop. A man stood in the yard, covering him with a rifle, a man whose figure was indistinct in the pale light from the sky. Bill lifted his hands. He would have no chance if he tried to draw his gun and he knew it. The man came closer.

"What are you doing here, Cameron?" he asked sharply.

Bill knew, a sudden, deep relief. This was Sam Lowry. Some of the tension went out of his body, then came back for Lowry's gun was steady, unwavering.

"What are you doing here?" Lowry asked again.

"I came to see Reb Russell," Bill answered. "What are you doing here, Sam?"

"I work here," Sam Lowry replied.

"Are you proud of it?"

"I still work here," Sam Lowry said harshly, "and when I take a man's pay I don't double-cross him. Start for wherever you left your horse. Fork it an' ride."

Bill shrugged his shoulders. He stepped from the porch and circled behind the

barn to where he had left his horse, ground hitched. Sam Lowry followed him. Bill climbed into the saddle. He looked down at Sam Lowry.

"Nora and Chris and I stopped by the old picnic grounds the other night," he said slowly. "We got to remembering a school picnic. We've grown a long way from those days, Sam. You don't have to work for a man if you don't want to."

"Start riding, Bill," Lowry said grimly.

"Why did you hang Lou Matheney?" Bill asked.

"Start riding, Bill," Lowry said again.

Bill turned his horse and started away, recalling of old how stubborn Sam Lowry could be. The habits and traits in men, he decided, didn't change much as they grew older. If anything, the early patterns only became stronger and more definite.

SAM LOWRY watched Bill disappear in the darkness. He stood back of the barn until the sound of Bill's horse could no longer be heard. After this he started back to the bunkhouse and on the way tripped over a board lying loose on the ground. He kicked at the board with a sudden, childish show of temper, and then walked on, a heavy scowl making ugly lines on his face.

Lou Matheney! He couldn't get Lou Matheney out of his mind. From what Sam had heard, Matheney had stolen some cattle but he wasn't sure of that at all. There was something else in the picture. Jeff Russell had hated Matheney almost as much as he hated Bill Cameron. A year before Matheney had beaten him to a pulp in a ruckus in town and Russell had never forgotten.

Sam Lowry had a cigarette and then another and after this one he packed his things and went out and saddled his horse. When the men got back from town he went in to see Jeff Russell.

"I'm quitting, Jeff," he said bluntly. "Quitting tonight."

Jeff Russell scowled at him. "Why?"

"Maybe I don't fit in any more."

"I need men now, Sam. I need help like I never did in my life."

"You've got a big enough crew."

Russell's eyes narrowed. "Don't get on the wrong side, Sam. You won't last long if you do."

"I'll take my chances on that."

This was as blunt a declaration as Sam Lowry could make and Russell understood it. His hand dropped to his gun and rested there for a moment. His muscles grew tense.

"Don't try it, Jeff," Lowry said quietly. "Don't try it."

Russell's hand dropped away. He said, "Come in tomorrow for your pay. You never were worth what you got. You're right. You don't belong here."

"I want the money tonight, Jeff," Lowry insisted. "I want it now."

Jeff Russell mopped a hand over his face. He turned to his desk, figured what Lowry had coming and paid him and Lowry backed to the door. He said, "So long, Jeff," and stepped outside.

He had brought his horse up close to the house and he was in the saddle immediately and was riding away, hard. He half expected a shot from the house but no shot came and after a time he slowed down and turned in the direction of Ludlow.

He felt better then he had felt for a long time. The memory of what had happened to Lou Matheney wasn't so sharp as it had been, though it would never leave him. He kept steadily toward Ludlow. He had no plans and hardly any money but he wasn't worried about that. After a time he could even grin.

An hour before dawn Bill Cameron rode back to the Russell ranch, boldly opened the corral gate, rode inside and drove out the horses. He sent two shots smashing through one of the windows of the bunkhouse. He emptied his gun

through another window. His shots were answered as he circled around the barn and took out across country.

Just north of the ranch house were several low hills. Bill tied his horse in the shelter of one of these hills and climbed to its crest. Lying there he watched it grow light and watched the activity at the ranch house. Two of the horses which he had scattered had been caught and were being saddled.

Bill sighted along his rifle. He drove a shot close to the men saddling the horses. He fired again as they jerked away and ran for the ranch house and then for a long time there was no sign of any activity. The sun came up and began its climb into the sky. After a time a man ventured into the yard. Bill couldn't see who he was. He let the man get as far as the corral fence, then fired his rifle and the man hit the ground, rolled over, came to his feet and zig-zagged toward the ranch house.

Several shots from the ranch house windows scraped at the crest of this hill, but the brush here was thick and Bill was well hidden. He grinned and waited. Another hour passed and a man broke abruptly from the house and raced for the barn. Bill sent a bullet screaming through the barn door. More shots from the house blasted at the top of the hill. At the same time, two men raced for the horses at the corral fence.

Bill's aim was more deliberate, now. He couldn't keep these men bottled up by merely firing close to them all day. Aiming for one of the men's legs he squeezed the trigger. He saw the man hit the ground hard and twitch in evident pain. The other man turned away from the horses and angled for the barn. Bill fired at him but missed. The man he had hit started pulling his body toward the house. After a time he made it.

The sun climbed until it was overhead. At intervals shots still peppered the top

of the hill. Several were close enough to make Bill hug the ground but those were lucky shots. He hadn't been spotted, he was sure. The high grass here had even hidden the smoke from his rifle.

In the early afternoon Bill deserted his post long enough to back down the hill to where he had left his horse for a drink and a scanty meal of tinned tomatoes and some bread which he had in his saddle bag. He had a smoke after this and then moved back to the crest of the hill.

Until late afternoon he kept Russell and his men bottled up in the ranch house and it amused him to think of how Jeff Russell would take this. He was one man and Russell had a dozen at his command, yet for this day at least, he had made Russell impotent. This was a story that would get out and that men would smile over for a long time. Russell couldn't take something like that.

Still in the shelter of these hills north of the Russell ranch, Bill Cameron turned away and late that night he dropped in on Chris Herwig.

"You didn't make the meeting here last night," Herwig complained. "I wish you had. Some of these fellows don't realize what we're up against."

Bill Cameron had expected something like this. He shook his head. "It looks to them like my fight, Chris. There aren't many people anxious to butt into something like that. It's not time, yet, to start anything. Give Russell more rope. Don't hurry things. I can keep out of his way for a while."

"Maybe you can?"

Bill shrugged his shoulders. "I need a load of food and maybe a couple of horses spotted in the hills. One at Silver Springs, another at the old prospector's shack on the Blue."

"I'll get 'em there. Take whatever food you want."

Bill loaded his saddle bags. He was

tired. For two nights, now, he had had hardly any rest and there was little chance for much rest tonight. To keep Chris out of this he had to get far away from here before Russell's men picked up his trail. He made his choice of food and turned to the door.

"Play it wise, Chris," he suggested. "If Russell's crowd rides in here don't buck them alone. Get out and join me."

Chris Herwig nodded. "I might do that anyhow."

"Ellen's in town."

"In town?" Herwig looked surprised.

"Reb Russell told me she wasn't coming back," Bill continued. "I don't know why. I don't know what happened."

Herwig straightened. His lips twitched. He turned his head and stared in the direction of Ludlow. "Thanks, Bill," he said slowly. "I'm not sorry. I guess you know that."

Bill moved out to where he had tied his horse. He was frowning as he climbed into the saddle. He wasn't sure how wise it had been to mention Ellen.

CHAPTER THREE

Rincon Ramrod

DEEP in the Rincons, Bill Cameron paused to rest his horse. He rolled a cigarette and after his smoke, climbed to the ridge of a hill and turned back through the shelter of scrub pine. At a vantage point he stopped for a time. From below he could hear men making their way up the canyon.

Russell's men were clinging grimly to the chase, more grimly than he had thought they would. This was the fourth day and they had shown no signs of giving up. Once the day before, and twice the day before that, he had been nearly trapped. There had been several running fights. He was marked by two bullet scratches. It had been that close.

Bill waited until the sounds below him had faded away and then still waited. After a moment he heard sounds in the canyon on the far side of the ridge. Russell's crowd learned fast. They had learned that when he rode up one canyon he might cross into the next and turn back. Now, when they drove him into the hills, they split up into small groups and pressed on, covering as much territory as they could. By gun signals they kept in touch with each other. Bill heard one of those signals now. Three shots, then one, then two. It was from the crowd following his trail and probably told the others the direction in which he had turned.

He dropped down into the canyon through which he had ridden and headed once more for the open park. He was tired, more tired than he had been for a long time. He was saddle sore and stiff. His eyes smarted. He had used up both horses which Chris Herwig had spotted for him. The horse he was now riding couldn't stand up under a long run. Night, however, wasn't too far ahead, and there would be fresh horses at Russell's ranch.

He rode directly that way and there was no immediate sign that the men knew he had escaped from the canyon country into which they had driven him. By dusk he was near the Russell ranch and when it was dark he rode up behind the barn, swung to the ground and circled around to the yard. There was a light in Reb Russell's room and in the bunkhouse. There were horses in the corral.

Bill moved quietly to the bunkhouse door. He thrust it open and stepped inside, his gun in his hand. The two men there jerked to their feet. They stood rigid as they recognized him.

"I need a horse," Bill said bluntly, "one that will take me a long ways. You with the sandy hair, go out and catch one for me. Leave your gun here. My horse is back of the barn. Put my saddle on the one you catch. If you do it quickly with-

out any trouble, maybe Baldy, here, will be alive when you get finished."

The sandy haired man unbuckled his gun belt. He laid it aside and headed for the door without a word. Bill motioned to the bald headed man to follow him. He kept Baldy covered while the other man caught a horse from the corral, then got his saddle and saddled it.

"You can tell Russell about this if you want to," Bill said when the horse was ready. "You can tell him, but he won't like it."

He disarmed Baldy, then mounted the horse and rode away, heading for Ludlow and keeping to the road, but where the road crossed Friday Creek he turned down the creek bed and after a mile swung east toward the Tiburon hills. Twice more that night he walked his horse through creek waters and when at last he turned into the hills he thought his trail had been pretty well covered.

All this had taken time and it was dawn before he came to Nora Loft's ranch in its wide valley far back in these hills. Smoke showed from the chimney and old Jimmy Kemper was out in the yard filling one of the watering troughs. Bill left the shelter of the pines and started for the house and Jimmy Kemper must have seen him and called Nora for the girl came suddenly to the door and waved.

"I've put on another plate," she called as Bill rode up. "You're just in time."

"I had that all figured out," Bill answered.

He dismounted, tied his horse to the corral fence and stood there for a moment, desperately tired but not wanting to show it. He was aware of the fact that he was unshaven and dirty. He was thinking he should never have come here at all.

Jimmy Kemper noticed the brand on his horse and grunted. "Jeff Russell never loaned anyone anything," he said pointedly.

"Jeff wasn't around when I borrowed

this horse," Bill answered in a hard voice.

"We could loan you a better one."

Bill grinned. "That's a deal we might talk over."

He moved up to the house, washed at the basin outside, and then stepped into the kitchen. It was a room warm with the smell of coffee and frying bacon. Nora stood at the stove, her face flushed from its heat. She said, "Call Jimmy and sit down, Bill. Things are about ready."

THERE were eggs to go with the bacon.

There were biscuits and butter and mountain honey. There was plenty of coffee. Bill ate until he was ashamed of himself, then pushed back his chair and shook his head.

"I'd like to go on," he said to Nora, "but I can't. If I ate any more I'd never be able to get up."

"You look tired, Bill," Nora answered slowly. "How long since you've had any sleep?"

"Not too long."

"How has it been?"

"Close, sometimes."

"I've been expecting you every day."

"I was never near here. I shouldn't have come this morning."

Nora's eyes had a thoughtful expression. "I was in town, yesterday," she mentioned. "From what I heard, Jeff has offered a bonus to the man who gets you. They say he's put it high. A thousand dollars."

"Am I worth that much?" Bill grinned.

The girl frowned. "I talked to Nels Underhill, the sheriff."

"What did Nels have to say?"

"He told me Jeff had made certain charges against you and that it was up to you to surrender yourself and face them in court."

"I wonder what he'd do if I rode in and surrendered?"

"He'd be mighty unhappy. He won't face the fact that Russell's men are after

you. He says they're not. He says there's nothing to the story that Russell has a bonus on you."

Jimmy Kemper had listened to all this in silence but now he looked over at Nora and asked, "What about Satyr? A little exercise would do him good."

Nora nodded. She said, "Bill, how would you like to have a horse that can really travel?"

"You might never get it back, Nora."

"That's a chance I'll take."

"Then I'll take the horse."

Nora nodded. She said, "Tonight. You're going to rest a while first."

"But I can't, Nora."

"You're still going to rest. No one saw you come here and you need it. Jimmy and I will go about our work as usual. The house is yours."

Jimmy Kemper got suddenly to his feet and stepped to the door. He took a look outside, then looked back at Bill and Bill Cameron hurried to the door. He took a quick look over the older man's shoulder. A band of horsemen were racing toward the ranch house. They were less than half a mile away, and were spreading out now as they galloped forward.

In that one glance Bill measured his chances of getting away and knew that he could never make it. He might reach his horse. He might get into the saddle but by that time the men would be here, or be so close they could ride him down.

Nora was at his side, pulling at his arm. "Get back, Bill," she ordered. "Let me handle this."

Bill shook his head. "You can't. There's nothing to handle."

"Jeff Russell will never set a foot in my house."

"You can't stop him, Nora. I fooled myself. I thought I was safe for a while. Someone must have seen me heading into the hills. Jeff Russell must have guessed where I would come."

Nora pulled him back. She said, "Bill, this is my ranch and you are my guest. If Jeff Russell tries anything I'll be in this whether I want to be or not. You keep back, keep out of sight. Jimmy, you stay in here, too."

Jimmy Kemper moved back from the door. He went into the front room and returned with a rifle, a box of shells and a six-gun. He loaded the rifle and set it near the back window. He examined the six-gun. His face showed no excitement at all.

Nora moved forward. She stood just inside the room, staring out into the yard. The men were here, now, and over Nora's shoulder Bill could see the flushed, ruddy face of Jeff Russell. Russell hadn't shaved for several days. His clothing was brush snagged and the man's hot temper showed in the way he leaned forward and stared at the house.

"What do you want, Jeff?" Nora called. "What's all the crowd for?"

"We want Cameron, Nora," the man answered. "Send him out here."

The girl shook her head. "I'd send no one out, Jeff Russell. I heard what happened to Lou Matheney."

"Send him out, Nora," Russell shouted. "Send him out or we'll come in after him."

Nora held out her hand toward Jimmy Kemper. She said, "Give me the rifle, Jimmy," and Jimmy Kemper placed the rifle in her hand.

"Jeff," she called, "I never break a promise. I'm making you one now. The first man to get off his horse in my yard gets a rifle bullet right between the eyes."

Jeff Russell mopped a hand over his face. "Don't be a fool, Nora," he shouted. "You can't stop us. Send him out here."

The girl shook her head. She stood there with the rifle to her shoulder, one finger on the trigger. Her lips made a tight, uncompromising line across her face. There was a sharp tension in her body.

Jeff Russell stared at the girl for a full minute in absolute silence. He realized she meant exactly what she said and that he could never scare her into doing as he wished. He realized also that if any move was made toward the house right now, he would have to lead it. But Cameron was cornered, would never get away. He told himself that, drew from it what satisfaction he could and finally made his decision.

"We'll give you an hour to think things over, Nora," he said gruffly. "Just an hour."

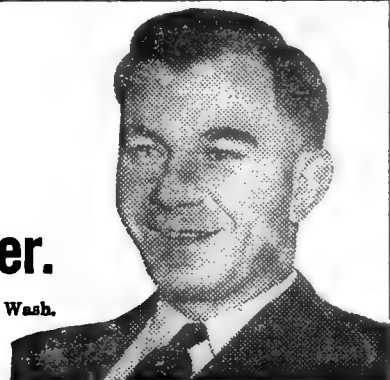
He signalled to his men and turned and rode away. At a safe distance from the house he reined up. He talked briefly to his men who afterwards spread out to various points in the valley, effectively surrounding the house.

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The hour had passed and at a waved command from Jeff Russell his men began closing in. Nora watched those she could see from one of the windows. When they were well within rifle range she said, "Now, Jimmy," and Jimmy's rifle cracked.

His shot was intentionally high but it stopped the men. Several of them fired in answer and Jimmy Kemper fired again. This his shot wasn't high. This time one of the men pitched out of his saddle and lay motionless on the ground. The others hastily rode back to where they were safe.

Nora still crouched at one of the windows. She turned and looked at Bill Cameron. She was pale and there was a strained expression on her face. She had seen the man hit and though Jimmy Kemper had fired the shot she knew that the responsibility was hers.

"I shouldn't have stayed here," Bill said harshly.

Nora shook her head.

They had argued about this during the hour they had waited. The argument had accomplished nothing. Nora wouldn't agree that he should go. Her stubbornness as strong as his own. Jimmy Kemper hadn't said much but he seemed to relish the prospect of the fight.

"This is like old times," he had said, his eyes glowing. "The park's been gettin' too civilized."

There was no point now, Bill realized, in regretting that he had come here. There was no point now in feeling he should have left. Jimmy Kemper had set the pattern of what would follow with his second rifle shot. A man had been killed. You couldn't take back a thing like that.

Another hour passed and another and then it was noon and there was no sign of any activity from Russell's men. They held their positions surrounding the house and seemed content to wait. Nora prepared a noon meal and they ate one after another, keeping a close watch on the men

outside. Their guns were cocked and ready.

THROUGHOUT the long afternoon Russell's men waited, several of them always mounted and ready for any possible move from the ranch house. As the sun dipped toward the Rincons they moved in closer. This day, Bill realized, had been a little like the day when he had kept Russell's men bottled up. But the pattern had changed. It was more deadly now. These men wouldn't ride away.

The sun was finally gone leaving on the clouds in the sky the pink and gold evidence of its passing. Gradually these colors began to reach out over the valley.

Bill and Jimmy Kemper and Nora were in the kitchen and Jimmy, straining his eyes, kept a close watch on the men who surrounded them. These three had talked over what they had to do. There were horses in the barn. They had to get there, mount them and get out. They must take their chances in the running fight which would follow. They could never hold off Russell's men in a fight at the house.

Jimmy Kemper lifted his rifle and nestled the stock against his shoulder and cheek. He looked back at Bill and Nora. "A shot will start it," he predicted. "They'll ride in awful close an' hit the ground. We've got to get to the stable an' get on our horses before then."

Bill was clasping Nora's hand. He nodded and said, "Now, Nora," and started forward, still holding her hand, pulling her with him. They were outside when they heard the blast of Jimmy's rifle. As they raced for the barn Bill heard shots from Russell's men singing past them. He heard Jeff Russell shouting and shouts from the others as they charged toward the house.

There was no time to saddle or bridle the horses. Nora took the one in the first stall and climbed to its back. Bill took the

second and the halter of the third. Nora, ahead of him, looked back and waved and then was racing her black across the yard and off to the north.

Bill rode out, leading the third horse. Jimmy was running toward him. Russell's men were close now. Terribly close. They were firing as they closed in, streaking bullets across the yard. Jimmy Kemper seemed to stumble as he neared Bill. He hit the ground, rolled over on his back and lay still. A bullet had reached him. How badly he was hurt, Bill didn't know.

Three men pulled up at the edge of the yard and as he saw them Bill whipped out his gun. He fired it twice, then crouching low over his horse, headed away from there. A bullet scraped across the top of his shoulder blades. Two mounted men to his left cut in toward him rapidly. Bill straightened. He emptied his gun at them and one spilled to the ground.

Nora was far ahead. She had slowed down and was waiting. As Bill drew even with her, his horse reared and screamed in agony. Bill felt himself tumbling through the air. He hit on his side and felt a sharp pain as his arm twisted under his body. Nora turned back. She brought her horse close to him as he stood up. She was reaching down. Bill caught her arm and swung up behind her.

Shots still streaked after them but they were close, now, to the fringing trees. Bill Cameron held on with one arm around Nora's waist. He looked back, remembering Jimmy Kemper and the way Jimmy had fallen. Beyond the pursuing riders he could see the ranch house and the yard but he caught no glimpse of Jimmy Kemper. Then they were in the dark shelter of the trees and Nora was urging the horse along some dim trail which climbed into the hills.

"Which way, Bill?" Nora asked.

She had stopped the horse, now. The night shadows had thickened but peering ahead over Nora's shoulder, Bill could see

that they had come to a fork in the trail.

"One way leads through the hills to the park," Nora was saying. "The other would take us to the Sawtelle road. To the outside world, Bill."

"And would you go with me?" Bill asked.

"Of course."

Nora was leaning back against him. Bill's arm tightened around her waist. He could feel the brush of her hair against his face. A sudden rush of emotion choked him. The arguments and misunderstandings which had come between them long ago Bill now recognized as foolish and unimportant differences. He put his other arm around Nora, the one he had hurt when he had been thrown from his horse. It wasn't troubling him much now. And for a moment, neither of them spoke. In this silence there was a mutual acceptance of what the future might hold.

Nora stirred. She said again, "Which way, Bill?"

"Neither," Bill answered slowly. "I've got to turn back, Nora."

The girl stiffened. She shook her head.

"Maybe Jimmy was killed," Bill continued. "But maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was just wounded. I know Jeff would waste no time on him. Jeff wouldn't be bothered with caring for a wounded man. Jeff would let him die. He wouldn't lift a hand to help him."

Some of the bitterness which had been riding him was in the sound of Bill's voice. Nora was biting her lips. She still made no answer.

"I can't go off and leave Jimmy," Bill added. "This wasn't his fight. He had no stakes in it at all, but he jumped in anyhow. You can't walk out on a man like that."

"They'll still be at the ranch house," Nora said under her breath. "Some of Jeff's men were wounded. Some may stay there."

Bill shrugged his shoulders. "What of it? What do you want me to do, Nora?"

The girl drew in a long, slow breath. "What you've got to do," she answered. "And what I've got to do. We'll go back."

THE MEN who had followed Bill Cameron and Nora into the hills returned to the Loft ranch, empty-handed. It was too dark to know which way the fugitives had gone, they reported to Jeff Russell. It would be wiser to pick up the trail tomorrow. Cameron and the girl had only one horse. They had no food. It would not be too difficult to run them down in the daytime when a man could see what he was doing.

Jeff Russell didn't argue this suggestion. He sat in the ranch house, scowling, and knowing that he had bungled in his attack on the Loft ranch. He had lost two men today. Two more had been wounded. It would be difficult for the park to swallow his excuses for what had happened here. Nora Loft was a woman. A man didn't make war on a woman. He would have to do something to counteract this, and do it swiftly. He would have to completely discredit Nora Loft in the eyes of those who knew her. This would not be easy.

He called Steve Olds outside. Steve Olds was one of the men he had hired quite recently. Olds was close to forty. He was a tall, thin, surly fellow, wanted by a good many sheriffs on the other side of the Rincons. He was quick with a gun. He didn't ask too many questions if you paid him enough. Jeff Russell was paying him enough.

"I've got to go to Ludlow," Russell said bluntly. "You stay here. Take charge of the chase tomorrow. Load the wounded men in the wagon and start the wagon toward the park. One man can handle that. Four of you will be left to go after Cameron and the girl. If neither of them are ever heard of again, I'll double

the amount I've already offered you."

"You still buy your murders cheap," said Steve Olds.

A flush of color came into Russell's face. His hands clenched but he held his temper under a rigid control. He had taken a lot from men like Olds and Taub and for a while he knew he had to. He could even the score later on. Right now, he needed these men.

"Are you interested?" he asked sharply.

Olds shrugged his shoulders. "What about this Jimmy Kemper?"

"How badly is he hurt?"

"He might pull through."

"Send him along or leave him here. I don't care what you do except for this. Get on the trail of Cameron and the girl early tomorrow. Run them down."

"Just as you say," Olds answered flatly.

Jeff Russell turned away. A few moments later he was mounted and riding toward Ludlow.

* * *

They crossed the meadow and drew up back of the barn. It was close to midnight but lights still showed around the curtained windows of the ranch house. A thin moon and high stars fought their uneven battle with the night shadows. Bill slid to the ground then lifted his arms to catch Nora. He held her tightly for a moment, then stood away.

"You get the horses," he whispered. "Three of them in case Jimmy can ride. No matter what happens, keep away from the house. That end of it is my job."

Nora squeezed his hand. She moved off in the direction of the corral. Bill angled toward the house. At the corner of the barn he stopped, briefly examined his gun, and afterwards settled it lightly in its holster. He stared toward the house. He had no plan. It had been impossible to make any plan. How many men would be here he had had no way of guessing. It might not be possible to even reach Jimmy Kem-

per. Or if he could reach him and get him away, Jimmy might not be able to ride. This was something he was going into blind.

The sound of voices reached him from the house, loud voices raised in argument. The voices lifted, then faded away. Bill Cameron moved swiftly forward. He crouched for a moment at the window. There, he could again hear the rumble of voices but he could distinguish no words. There was a tear in the blanket covering this window. It was high, but on tip-toe he could see through it. Two men sat at the table in this front room. They were cutting cards. These were the men talking, arguing. On a couch across the room a third man was asleep. Another dozed in a chair. Bill could see no sign of Jimmy Kemper. The door to the bedroom was open. It occurred to him that Jimmy might be in there.

Bill moved to the back of the house. He tried the kitchen door. It was locked. He circled, then, toward the bedroom windows. Both were closed. Someone was coming across the yard toward the house. Bill's hand dropped to his gun. His body went rigid, then relaxed. It was Nora. He went to meet her.

"You were to say with the horses," he whispered.

"They're ready," said Nora. Someone did the job for us. Four saddled horses are tied to the corral fence. They are four of the best I own. Could you see into the house?"

"Four men in the front room," Bill replied. "Two asleep, two playing cards. I didn't see Jimmy. I thought he might be in the bedroom. I tried the kitchen door but it was locked. What about the windows?"

"The back one can't be fastened," Nora replied. "It slides up easily."

Bill nodded. "I'll see if he's in the bedroom. If he isn't I'll have a talk with the men in the front room. You get back to

the horses. We agreed that this part of the job was mine."

Nora bit her lips. She watched Bill head back toward the house. She watched him stand for a moment at the back bedroom window. She watched him open it and climb inside. After this, she moved forward. Her breath was coming fast and her body was cold with perspiration. She was terribly afraid.

Bill Cameron stood against the wall, just inside the open bedroom window. Light from the front room sifted in through the open door. In its pathway, on the floor near the foot of the bed, lay the blanket covered figure of Jimmy Kemper. The bed was occupied by two other figures. These were two of Russell's men who had been wounded in the attack on the ranch but Bill didn't know that.

"One more cut," growled a voice from the front room. "One more an' that's all. I've got to go out and unsaddle those horses."

"Make it double, then," said the other man at the table.

"No. Same stakes as before."

"Make it double just once."

The two men went on arguing. Bill Cameron edged forward. He reached the foot of the bed, dropped to his hands and knees. Jimmy Kemper was breathing but his eyes were closed. There was almost no color in his face. Bill stretched out his hand. He touched Jimmy on the shoulder. He whispered his name.

Jimmy Kemper woke instantly. He turned his head toward Bill, then glanced quickly in the direction of the front room.

"How bad is it, Jimmy?" Bill whispered.

"Through the shoulder," said Jimmy Kemper, his voice low, husky. "Not bad. It's stopped bleeding. What are you doing here?"

"Nora is outside," Bill answered. "We've got horses. I'll carry you to the window. We'll get you away. In the

morning we'll get a wagon to take you to Ludlow."

Jimmy Kemper shook his head. "I could never make it."

"Sure you could."

"There are two others here who have been wounded. I'll take my chances with them."

"You'll go with us," said Bill grimly.

He glanced toward the window. It was only a few steps away. Getting Jimmy through it might be awkward but he was sure it could be done. They wouldn't wait until morning about the wagon. They could hitch up one tonight. He got to his feet and as he straightened a man's figure loomed up in the doorway. Lamp-light glistened on the gun in the man's hand. The man was leaning forward, peering into the room. He could see Bill Cameron but the light probably wasn't strong enough to distinguish Bill's features.

"All right," the man said sharply. "We heard you. Come on out here where we can see what you look like."

Bill didn't move. He knew that if he stepped into the front room under the cover of this man's gun he would have no chance at all. His body was rigid. His hand was close to his holster.

"Come on out here!" shouted the man in the doorway. "Do I have to—"

Bill clawed up his gun. He heard the scream of a shot high above his head as he fired. The man in the doorway took a short step forward. He twisted half around. His knees caved in. He fell heavily to the floor.

A clamor of voices reached in from the front room. Steve Olds was shouting orders. Bill Cameron swung toward the window. "I'll be back, Jimmy," he promised. "Hang on."

He had reached the window and was climbing through it when Steve Olds lunged into the room. He heard the roar of Olds' gun. A smashing blow struck

him on the head. It was like the blow of a club. It seemed to numb every muscle in his body. It brought a thick film to his eyes through which he could hardly see. He was falling as he came through the window and as he struggled to his feet, Nora's arm was around him and she was holding him up and trying to urge him away from the house.

He heard more firing but the shots seemed far away. Nora was saying something to him. He could hear her voice but not her words. And then he could no longer hear her voice or any sound at all. The darkness into which he had been walking had become too heavy, too thick. It smothered all conscious understanding.

When Bill Cameron first struggled back to consciousness it was still dark. He was mounted on a horse in front of Nora, whose arms held him in the saddle. He realized, in a confused way, that they were climbing into the hills. There was a throbbing pain in his head. He turned and spoke to Nora, telling her that they had to go back, but before he could finish what he was saying the pain grew worse and the darkness closed in on him again.

It was morning when he next awoke. The sun was already high in the sky. He was lying in the shelter of a screen of bushes bordering a creek. Nora was seated on the ground near him.

"How do you feel?" she demanded. "You had me worried."

"I feel hungry," Bill answered.

"You don't need food," said Nora. "You need rest. Just take it easy."

"Where are we?" Bill asked.

"Within three miles of the ranch."

Bill touched the thick bandage wound around his head. He could still feel the hammering pain but it wasn't so heavy.

"We've got to go back," he said slowly. "Jimmy was there, Nora."

"He's not there now," said the girl. "He and two other men were loaded into a wagon early this morning. The wagon

started in the direction of Ludlow. I saw it leave. Jimmy walked to the wagon with one of the men helping him."

Bill lay silent for a moment, considering what Nora had said. There was nothing he could do now but hope that the wagon had really gone to Ludlow and that Jimmy would get the attention he needed.

"Three of Jeff Russell's men followed the wagon toward Ludlow," Nora added. "There's no one at the ranch, now. We can go back there when you feel up to the ride."

Bill shook his head. "We'll ride the other way."

"Where?"

"To Ludlow."

Nora was frowning. She stared soberly at the ground. There was no way, she realized, in which she could prevent Bill Cameron from riding to Ludlow. Nothing would turn him aside from the course he had taken. This was one of his strengths, and at the same time, one of his weaknesses.

IT WAS an hour after dark when they reached Ludlow. They dismounted at the outskirts of town and left the horses in Sam Jefferies' barn knowing there wasn't much chance Jefferies would come out to the barn before morning.

"I'll wait at Ruth Parker's," said Nora. "Ruth will not tell anyone I'm there. Don't be too long, Bill."

"I want to see the sheriff," Bill answered. "There may be others in town whom I want to see."

"You'll—not hunt for Jeff Russell?"

"Not too hard."

Nora bit her lips, knowing she had to be satisfied with this half promise, but still resenting it, still wanting more of a part in what might lie ahead. She nodded and turned away in the direction of Ruth Parker's.

Bill Cameron touched the new bandage which circled his head. The scalp wound

still bothered him. All day he had ridden with a nagging headache. He smoothed a hand over his forehead as though to drive it away, then angled through the town toward the sheriff's office. He came up behind it, moved between the sheriff's office and the feed store and edged cautiously forward. He could soon see a part of the street. This was a quiet night. There were several saddled horses tied in front of the Tiburon Saloon. A team and wagon stood in front of the store. A man who looked a good deal like Sam Lowry was on the hotel porch. Two men were in front of the saloon, talking, but it was impossible to make out who they were.

There was a light in the sheriff's office. Bill took a quick look up and down the street, then stepped out on the walk and moved past the curtained window of the sheriff's office to the door. He opened the door and stepped inside, his hand on his gun.

Nels Underhill sat at his desk, writing a letter. He looked up as Bill came in and his pen slipped from his hand, making a blot on the paper. His eyes widened. His mouth sagged open. "You!" he managed to gasp. "You—Cameron—" and then words failed him and he was silent.

"What's wrong, Sheriff?" Bill asked dryly. "Does your conscience bother you?"

The sheriff moistened his lips. He shook his head but made no other answer.

"You haven't been riding with the posse, have you?" Bill said slowly.

"What posse?" Underhill asked.

"The one which has been after me."

"There's been no posse after you."

"Then you don't want me. I'm not under arrest."

"No." The word was sharp, almost violent.

Bill took his hand away from his gun. He reached for his tobacco and papers and started fashioning a cigarette. "Last night," he said. "Jeff Russell and a crowd

of his men made an attack on the Loft ranch. They were after me. They didn't get me but in the ruckus they got Jimmy Kemper. If there's been no posse after me they were acting outside of the law, Sheriff. I want Russell arrested. I want his whole crowd arrested and I want it done now."

Nels Underhill blinked. He moistened his lips again. "I—I don't believe you, Cameron," he said thickly. "I don't believe Russell would do a thing like that. I don't believe it."

Bill threw the cigarette he had just made to the floor. He moved forward until he stood over the sheriff, a sudden, blazing anger showing in his eyes.

"Quit trying to play both sides, Underhill," he grated. "You know what's been going on. Where do you stand? What does the law mean in this park? You can't duck a decision much longer, Underhill. You can't go on keeping your eyes shut."

The sheriff pushed his chair back. "I'll see Jeff Russell right away," he said with an abrupt show of spirit. "You stay here. Wait for me here."

"Is Russell in town?"

"He was a while ago. I don't think he's gone yet."

Underhill turned to the wall to get his hat and at that moment the door opened and a wide shouldered, black bearded man stepped into the room. He said, "Hey, Underhill, I—" and his voice broke off suddenly as Bill Cameron turned to face him. His voice broke off, he stiffened, his hand swung down to his gun.

There was no time for talk. The man worked for Russell. He had been with those who had chased Bill through the Rincons and who had taken part in the raid on Nora's ranch. His gun came out of its holster. It lifted toward Bill Cameron and Bill clawed up his own gun and fired and then fired again.

The bearded man's shot was wide. He

took a step forward. His eyes were glassy and a froth of blood showed at his lips. His knees suddenly gave away and he dropped to the floor.

Bill looked beyond the man's body to the door. He caught a glimpse of Jeff Russell. Russell had been headed this way but had jumped back. Bill had no chance to fire at him.

"Cover the back door, Al!" Russell was shouting. "Mark get the others. Cameron is here!"

Bill Cameron jerked around and headed across the room. He had no intention, if he could help it, of being bottled up in here with the doubtful allegiance of the sheriff. He came to the back door, jerked it open and stepped outside.

A man was hurrying along the side of the building. Bill moved that way. He could make out the bulk of the man's figure against the dim light in the street. He drove a shot at the man and heard his high, startled cry and saw the flash of his gun in answer.

Bill swung in the other direction. He hurried past the feed store and around it to the main street. Several men were racing down the street toward the sheriff's office. Bill stared across the street to where several horses were hitched to the rail in front of the Tiburon saloon. He was pretty sure he couldn't get that far with any degree of safety. But he really didn't want to. He had run long enough. He was tired of running.

Bill reloaded his gun and then stood there in the deep shadows of the feed store, waiting.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil Collects His Due

EVERYTHING would be settled tonight. Bill had that feeling very strongly. He could sense it just as he was aware of the way the wind had changed,

turning cold with the night. He took a look out on the street and now could see no one. Russell's men he decided had sifted into the shadows back of the buildings lining this street and were searching for him. How many there might be he didn't know. He couldn't even be sure where they were. Some of them, like him, might be watching the street.

He thought he heard someone behind him and he stepped quickly around the corner of the building and moved along the front of the feed store to the door. There was a man standing in the shadows at the corner of the saloon across the street. Bill could make out his figure. He knew the man could see him, but identification by either of them was impossible.

Jeff Russell showed up in the street and turned swiftly into the sheriff's office. Bill saw him clearly in the light from the door. The man had driven Bill into the street had edged along the side of the feed store was now at the corner where Bill had been standing. For a while the man waited there, then he moved forward. He took one step toward Bill and stopped, his body rigid. He was holding his gun and he suddenly swung it up. Bill lifted his gun and fired, and then fired again.

The man swung half around, his knees folding as he turned. Bill Cameron hurried past him, rounded the corner of the feed store and moved swiftly to the rear of the building. There he turned toward

the sheriff's office. A gun blasted at him from the darkness just ahead. He dived for the ground. He fired in the direction of that shot and then rolled to the left, close against the building. He lay there motionless.

Shots raked along the ground where he had been and someone who had followed him from the street answered those shots and then ducked back between the buildings. The man who had been back of the sheriff's office edged forward, passing Bill without a glance in his direction.

A sudden blast of firing ripped along the passageway beyond the feed store. Russell's men were again shooting at each other. Bill got to his feet. He moved quickly to the rear door to the sheriff's office and stood there for a moment, listening, then he opened the door and stepped inside and covered the two men in the room with his gun. Nels Underhill, who was the first to see him, choked off a startled gasp and lifted his hands shoulder high. Russell jerked around and stared at him, his eyes showing something of the shock he felt. For a moment he stood there, rigid, motionless, then he too, lifted his hands.

Bill Cameron closed the door. He reached behind his back, felt for the bolt and pushed it into its slot. He heard more shooting outside and a dry laugh broke from his throat. "Your men, Russell," he said mockingly.

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Russell moistened his lips. His jaw moved up and down but he didn't seem able to speak. Perspiration glistened on his forehead and showed around his mouth.

Bill moved forward. He reached for Russell's gun. He jerked it from its holster, then moved in front of the sheriff and still covering Russell, swung his other gun in the air and brought it down sharply against the sheriff's head. Underhill tried to duck but wasn't quick enough. The barrel of the gun caught him across the temple and he dropped to the floor of the office and lay there motionless.

"You can't do this, Cameron," Russell said hoarsely. "You've got to give me a chance."

"What chance did you give Matheney?" Bill grated.

Russell had backed away until his shoulders were against the wall. He shook his head from side to side. His arms were spread out against the wall, fingers outstretched. Bill could hear the sharp sound of his breathing.

"We'll do it this way," Bill said slowly. "You'll get your chance."

He tossed the sheriff's gun into the far corner of the room and tossed his own after it and then moved toward Russell. As he stepped forward he saw the sudden light of hope come into Russell's eyes and heard a sharp cry break from the man's lips. Russell lunged forward.

Bill Cameron side stepped. He whipped his fist up into Russell's face, half breaking the man's rush and he moved in then and slammed him twice more in the face. Russell's fist scraped across his cheek. Another blow caught him high on the forehead. Bill stabbed once more for Russell's face. He moved in again, straightening Russell up with a blow under the jaw and then staggering him with a hard right to the side of the face.

The man turned as Bill hit him. He

swung up the gun, squeezing the trigger. Bill heard the roar of the shot. He felt the sting of powder burns on his face. He twisted the gun from Russell's hand. He hit the puffy, bloody face of this man but there seemed to be no power left in his blows.

Bill stood over him, breathing heavily, aware of the shaky feeling in his knees and of a dizziness which was almost overpowering. He turned and moved back to where his gun was lying and picked it up and as he looked around he saw the gun in Russell's hand and saw it lifting toward him.

The gun Russell was holding wasn't very steady. Its barrel wavered a little. Bill leveled the gun he had picked up from the floor. His finger tightened on the trigger and he felt the kick of the gun in his hand and saw a blank empty look come into Russell's face. The gun Russell had been holding dropped from his hand. Blood trickled from a hole in his forehead and his body tilted over sideways to the floor.

BILL CAMERON walked on up to the livery stable with Sam Lowry. Near it they stopped for a moment and had a cigarette.

Lowry finished his cigarette. He dropped it and stepped on it. He said, "Wish me luck, Bill."

"Get moving, you chump," Bill answered.

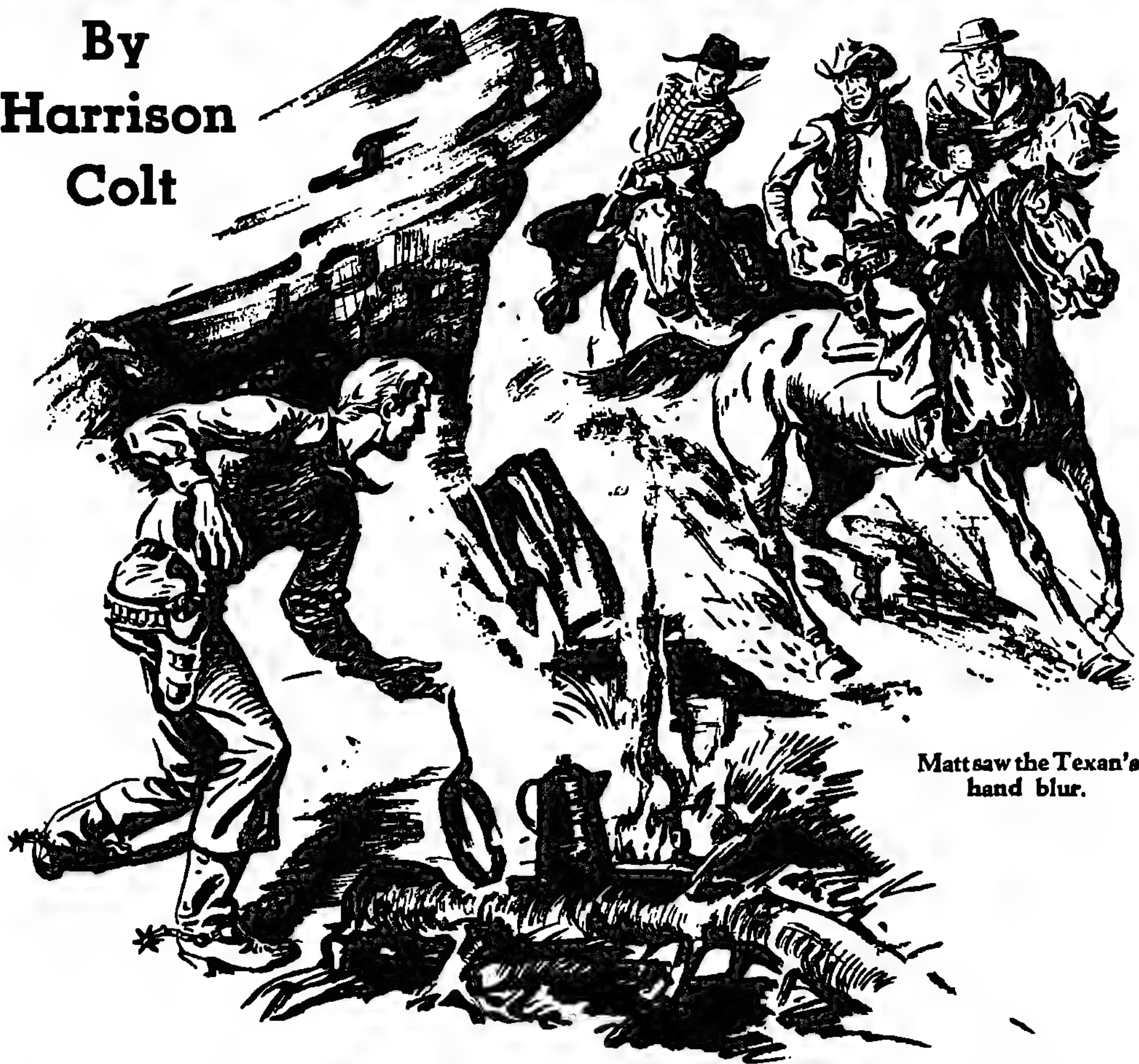
He stood and watched as Sam Lowry walked forward and disappeared in the deep shadows near the livery stable. After a time he saw two riders move into sight and head out in the direction of the Tiburon hills. They rode very close together. Kate Banning had been waiting for Sam Lowry.

Bill turned back down the street to Ruth Parker's. Nora would be waiting on the porch.

THE END

MANHUNT FOR THE GUNSMOKE GHOST

By
Harrison
Colt



Matt saw the Texan's hand blur.

Matt Tobin had his pardner pegged for a woolly lamb—but he learned that sometimes such soft white fleece may conceal the whangleather hide of a first-class fighting gun-wolf!

DESPITE the pain and soreness of limbs not yet accustomed to the battering of a hard wagon seat across endless miles of rough wilderness trail, Matt Tobin felt a deep inner glow of satisfaction. In the ruddy glare of the cooking fire, he watched his partner, the thin, silvery-haired Texan, Ben Gaines, his evening meal finished, produce a

battered, ancient pipe. The older man fished a burning twig from the fire, sucked strenuously at the stem and then leaned back with a little grunt, puffing contentedly.

For a moment, Matt listened to the tumultuous murmur of nearby Hangman's Creek plunging down the mountainside, an insistent clamour of rushing waters

against the boulders that lined its bed. Then his eyes strayed to the pair of Murphy wagons drawn up just within the outer edge of the fire's ruby circle of illumination. His satisfaction of the moment was wrapped up in those two wagons.

He and his partner had brought these wagons, heavily-loaded with supplies, creaking, groaning and bumping along the hundreds of miles of nearly impassable trail from Benton. Their destination was the small, but booming, gold camp of Elizabeth City. Sometime tomorrow, if all went well, they should have arrived, ready to set up tent or lean-to and embark on their venture of becoming store-keepers.

But it was not the thought of this alone that brought a faint suggestion of a smile to Matt Tobin's lean, narrow-jawed face, nor stirred sparks of pleasure in his bluish-grey eyes. He was thinking of Jud Lister, looking forward to the sight of Lister's face when the two men brought their wagons into Elizabeth City on the morrow.

It had been Jud Lister who had been responsible for Matt Tobin's decision to turn store-keeper. The whole thing had its beginning one day when Matt had come down from his claim on Frying Pan Creek to get some badly needed supplies. Jud Lister had filled his order, figured briefly with a pencil, then announced the amount due him.

Matt's jaw sagged in astonishment. At first he thought he'd heard wrong. Like the other miners, he was used to paying exorbitant prices for the things he needed. But this figure that Lister had named was utterly beyond reason. Matt told him so.

"That's ten times what the stuff's worth!" he exclaimed angrily. "I'll be damned if I pay such a price for a few measly supplies!"

Jud Lister stared at him with no ex-

pression on his flabby, heavy-jowled features. His eyes, chilly as those of a reptile, blinked sullenly. "Tobin," he said arrogantly, "prices are goin' up. It'll cost yuh jest twice as much fer that stuff now—take it or leave it!"

Matt spun on his heel and started for the door. But Lister's voice halted him. "Tomorrow," he called, "the price on what yuh need will have doubled agin! Don't yuh think yuh better change yore mind? Yuh know as well as I do, there ain't another store fer hundreds of miles. Yuh'll either pay my price or go without. Better think it over!"

MATT had thought it over—at the Last Chance Saloon. He'd gotten very drunk and very angry, and he'd made some uncomplimentary remarks about Jud Lister. Furthermore, he'd mentioned the need for a store that would give the miners a square deal instead of gouging them to the limit. The miners who heard him nodded their heads in agreement.

When, some hours later, Matt had lurched unsteadily through the batwings and started down the dark street, two men had detached themselves from the shadows and followed him. They overtook him at the edge of town. Matt preferred not to remember what had hapened then. He had been in bed nearly a week recovering from the beating he had received and it hadn't strained his imaginative powers overly to figure out who he had to thank for it.

Lying on a bunk in a friend's cabin in town, Matt had a chance to do plenty of thinking. It was then he had worked out his plan to bring in supplies from outside an open a second store in Elizabeth City.

Across the fire, Ben Gaines sat up straight and cocked his head slightly to one side almost like a hound dog. He took the pipe from his mouth. In his soft, easy Texas drawl, he said, "Reckon some-one's a-comin'."

Matt Tobin got to his feet. He found that his hand was resting on the butt of the six-shooter tucked inside his belt, and that there was a certain comfort in the feel of the cold metal of the weapon. But a moment later, as a lone horseman rode out of the darkness, he grinned sheepishly and took his hand from the gun.

The man pulled up his horse and peered curiously at the two men beside the fire. Matt saw that he was a man in his forties, unkempt, unshaven. His eyes were bleary and reddened, and lines of dissipation were heavily graven under his eyes and at the corners of his weak mouth.

His gaze shifted to the wagons standing nearby, and a sudden eagerness stirred in his sallow, ferret-like features.

"What you got in 'em wagons?" he demanded abruptly. "Any whiskey?"

Matt grinned. "Nary a drop," he replied.

The man made no attempt to conceal his disappointment. He frowned, stared at the wagons with evident frustration. "You sure?" he persisted.

Mat said patiently, "You kin take a look for yourself, if you don't believe me. There's flour, sugar, salt, coffee and canned goods, but not as much as a pint of Taos lightnin'."

The man gave a disgusted grunt, but he stared at Matt thoughtfully. "You freightin' that stuff fer somebody? Jud Lister, mebbe?"

"My partner and me are freightin' it for ourselves."

The other's eyes narrowed and he shot a quick, puzzled glance in the other direction of Ben Gaines. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you was figgerin' on openin' up a store."

"Might be at that."

"Not in Elizabeth City?"

"In Elizabeth City?"

The man's jaw sagged in astonishment. He stared at the two men, wide-eyed. "'Course, it ain't none o' my business,"

he advised, "but if'n I was in your boots, I'd go mighty slow about doin' somethin' like that. Jud Lister ain't gonna like it much."

Anger glinted in Matt Tobin's bluish-grey eyes. "Mebbe we don't give a damn whether he likes it or not!" he suggested grimly.

The mounted man drew in his breath sharply and a look of apprehension flitted across his whisker-stubbed, haggard features. "I don't figger you gents are actin' very smart," he warned. "I haven't been in these parts long. But I've been here long enough to find out one thing—it ain't healthy to buck Jud Lister! If you want advice—"

"Look, mister," broke in Matt. "When I got this idea of settin' up a competin' store in Elizabeth City, I never figgered that Lister would turn any handsprings about it. And I don't reckon it'll make him any happier to find out the prices we intend to sell the stuff for. They'll be fair prices—fair to the miners, fair to my partner and me. Just enough to give us an honest profit on our time and money, no more."

He paused, then added as an afterthought, "It'll mean an end to gougin', hold-up prices in Elizabeth City. Lister will be forced to sell at reasonable prices or go out of business."

For a moment the horseman didn't say anything. Then he gave an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. "I'd say what you was figgerin' on doin' amounts to diggin' your grave and carvin' your name on the tombstone. However, if you hanker fer a nice quiet spot in Boothill, jest go ahead."

WITH that word of warning, he swung his horse away from the fire, dug in his spurs, and sent the animal off at a gallop in the direction of Elizabeth City. Matt watched the shadowy figure until it was swallowed up in the darkness and only the fading sound of hooves on the

road remained echoing in the night.

Ben Gaines stood beside him, still peering into the blackness after the departing rider. Turning suddenly, Matt surprised an odd expression on the man's face. Then, instantly, it was gone, and Matt was wondering whether his imagination was playing him tricks.

"Accordin' to that gent, yore friend Lister jest about runs things to suit hisself up in these parts," commented Gaines.

Matt nodded. "He has—up to now!" He gave the older man a careful glance. "I told you what we might be up against. You still feel the same way about goin' ahead with this scheme of ours?"

Ben Gaines' face was expressionless. He drawled softly, "Ain't seen nothin' to make me change my mind so far."

Matt frowned slightly, studied his partner's saddle-colored features with narrowed eyes. He was still puzzled by the strangeness in the man's face a moment ago. Had fear been behind that look? Or had it been something else?

He knew little of Gaines, having met him for the first time about a month ago at Fort Benton. It had been the older man himself who had suggested the partnership. To Matt Tobin, at the time, it had seemed a good idea. It had meant buying two wagons instead of one, doubling the amount of supplies he would be able to bring in to the little Montana mining camp from Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri.

But now, suddenly, he began to have his doubts. Ben Gaines seemed mild and easy-going. Mebbe he was too mild and easy-going to be mixed up in this kind of business. The sallow-faced stranger had been right about one thing. This invasion of Jud Lister's domain wasn't likely to prove healthy. Even after he had turned in, these disturbing thoughts lingered in his mind. Despite his weariness, they kept him from dropping off to sleep immediately.

The two men were out of their blankets before dawn next morning. By the time the first pink glow had begun to color the rim of the eastern sky, they had finished breakfast, hitched the mules to the wagons and were ready to pull out. Matt forgot his foreboding of the previous evening and felt almost cheerful as he climbed onto the seat of the first wagon and sent the mules jogging forward along the road.

They were within five miles of Elizabeth City when it happened. The three men had been waiting behind a tall outcropping of rock at one side of the road. As the wagons came up, they urged their horses into the trail. Their faces were masked by bandanas and each man held a leveled Winchester in his hands.

Matt pulled up his mules. His voice had a queer, strained sound to it when he spoke. "What's the meanin' of this?"

One of the men gave a loud, half-contemptuous laugh. He snarled, "It means we're takin' over these wagons o' yours. Got any objections?"

Matt felt an emptiness at the pit of his stomach. He had expected trouble once they reached Elizabeth City. But this sudden and unexpected turn of events had caught him flat-footed and unprepared. Once again Jud Lister had gotten the best of him. At the thought a white-hot rage within him.

For a moment, despite the odds, Matt Tobin had a wild impulse to reach for the gun at his belt. Only the thought of the silvery-haired Texan at the reins of the second wagon restrained him. Any rash move on his part would endanger his partner's life. In the trio of masked riders before him, he recognized hardened gunmen and killers. Men who would not hesitate to cut down the two men in the wagons if it suited their purpose. He eyed the leveled Winchesters, said tersely, "Since you put it that way—no."

"You got good sense," chuckled the masked man. "Now git yore paws in the

air an' git down off'n 'em damn wagons!"

A minute later, having allowed themselves to be disarmed, the two partners stood helplessly by the side of the road and watched their wagons being driven off. One of the outlaws remained behind, his rifle trained on the pair, until the wagons moved out of sight. Then he put spurs to his horse and galloped swiftly after them.

For a moment or two neither man spoke. Then the Texan's rueful drawl cut through the silence. "Reckon that gent who visited our camp last evenin' did some talkin' when he hit town."

Matt nodded grimly. "Looks like he didn't lose much time in huntin' up Jud Lister and warnin' him we was comin'. I'd admire to get my hands on that hombre for just ten minutes!"

Ben Gaines said nothing. He just looked thoughtful.

IT WAS near mid-day when the two partners reached Elizabeth City. A short distance outside of town they encountered a stocky, red-bearded miner leading a burro. He stared at the two men, surprise and bewilderment plain on his grizzled features.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed loudly. "Whar's yore wagons?"

Matt gave him a glance of quick suspicion. "How did you know we were bringin' in a couple of wagons?"

"How did I know?" The man's jaw sagged. "Why, hell—everybody in town knows about that! I was at the Last Chance last night when Lafe Stevens rode in. Said he'd met you on the road an' you was bringin' two freight wagons full of supplies. That's why I come out here. Thought mebbe I'd get first crack at 'em."

A moment later, when Matt had informed him what had happened to the wagons, he shook his head soberly, remarked, "Reckon the boys'll be plumb disappointed to hear that. They're mighty tired o' payin' the prices Jud Lister's been askin' lately. You got any idea who the men were that hi-jacked yore wagons?"

Matt frowned and shook his head glumly. "Never saw 'em before, so far as I know. They didn't look much like miners. I got a hunch them gents never panned an ounce of gold in their lives. Looked more like cowboys, hired gunmen."

Red-beard rubbed his bristly cheek thoughtfully. "What you figger on doin' now?"

Matt looked over at his partner. "Ben," he said, "I've been thinkin'. Those wagons are pretty heavily loaded. They ought to leave deep wheel-marks where they leave the road."

The Texan said, "But we'll need a pair of horses if we're gonna get on the trail of the wagons. And a few shootin' irons might come in handy, too."

"I don't think there'll be any trouble

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about that. There are quite a few people in town who don't like Lister any better than I do. They'll borrow us what we need."

"Hell, yes," said the red-bearded miner. "Yuh won't have no trouble there. I guarantee it."

Elizabeth City was a city in name only. Beside the large square frame building that was Jud Lister's general store, there was a livery, several saloons, a hay and feed store, a rough log two-story hotel and an assortment of miners' cabins, shacks and tents. These were scattered in indiscriminate fashion along the sloping sides of Shirt-tail Gulch.

As Matt and his partner and the red-bearded man picked their way along the muddy stretch that passed for a street, word of what had happened preceded them. Men stared at the newcomers in silence, their disappointment plain in their faces.

When Matt and Ben Gaines, mounted on borrowed horses and armed with borrowed weapons, galloped out of camp a short time later, half a dozen volunteers accompanied them. It was a dejected, discouraged group of men that rode back into town that evening. A night chill was in the air and the sun had disappeared behind the dark barrier of mountains to the west. As they rode past the Last Chance Saloon, Ben Gaines said, "Reckon I could stand a drink. How about you, Matt?"

They dismounted and pushed through the batwings and Matt became aware that a sudden hush had descended upon the room. A group of miners standing by the bar turned, staring at them curiously. Matt recognized the red-bearded man among them. He said, "Reckon you didn't have much luck?"

Ben Gaines said, "This ain't the kind of country where yuh kin follow a trail. Too much rocks and shale. There were hundred of places where they mighta

turned off the road and never left a trace."

Matt Tobin's eyes happened to be resting on the bartender while his partner was speaking. He saw a faint flicker of satisfaction stir in the man's eyes. It puzzled Matt. Why should the man act relieved to find out that they had failed to pick up the trail of the wagons?

MATT TOBIN felt a sudden excitement. He was remembering that it had been in this same saloon, with this same man tending bar, that he had made those remarks about Jud Lister on that earlier occasion—on the occasion when two of Lister's men had waited for him in the dark street to administer a savage beating. . . .

Matt reached into his vest pocket for the ten-dollar gold piece that was the extent of his present wealth. He tossed it carelessly on the mahogany bar. "Bartender," he directed, "give me an' my partner a bottle and a couple glasses. We got a lot of drinkin' to do!"

The white-haired Texan gave him an astonished look. "Hold on, Matt! We got better uses fer that money than drinkin' it up!"

But Matt ignored his protests. He picked up the bottle and glasses and headed for a table along the far wall. When Ben Gaines, a worried frown on his face, took his place beside the younger man at the table, Matt leaned close, whispered, "Play up to me, Ben. I'm not bein' such a fool as you might think."

The Texan frowned. "I wish I knowed what this was all about."

"It may be a damn fool idea of mine. And again, it might possibly force Lister to show his hand. Anyhow, I figger it's worth tryin'. Look, Ben, here's what I want you to do. . . ."

For awhile the two men sat drinking quietly. Then, to all appearances, a violent argument broke out between them. Their voices rose loudly. Suddenly the

older man jumped to his feet and stalked angrily out into the street. Matt, left alone, seemed to be drinking steadily. At least the amount of liquor in the bottle was shrinking appreciably. Several times, out of the corner of his eye, Matt caught the bartender staring at him across the room.

Matt filled his glass, lifted it, said suddenly, "Here's to Jud Lister and thievin' prices!" He said it loudly so that everyone in the room could hear. The miners in the room fell silent and stared at him sharply. When Matt flicked a swift glance at the white-aproned man behind the bar, he saw that he was frowning in annoyance.

A moment later, in an equally loud voice, he remarked, "This is a poor country for road agents. An honest road agent would starve in these parts. Ain't no dust left to steal after Jud Lister gets through sellin' folks what they need!"

A miner growled agreement. "Drunk or not, the lad's speakin' the truth!"

Matt staggered to his feet and gazed around the room. "What's the matter with you miners?" he demanded. "How long you gonna let Jud Lister wipe his feet on you? Weren't any of you in Virginia City a couple of winters ago when a couple of merchants cornered all the flour in town? Remember what happened? A miners' committee called on the merchants, give 'em a choice o' two things—sellin' the flour at a reasonable price or hangin'. Ain't any of you men got guts enough to organize a committee to buck Jud Lister?"

Matt let his eyes move across the faces of the miners, noted with a sudden quickening of his pulses that the bartender had vanished from his place behind the bar. Matt sat down heavily and let his head drop forward onto his arms in a simulated drunken stupor.

The miner who had spoken earlier said, "I think he's got somethin' there, boys.

Why shouldn't we organize a committee? Seems like a damn good idea to me!"

While the miners talked, Matt kept his eyes on the saloon's back door and waited. Soon he'd know if Lister had actually risen to the bait. He saw the bartender suddenly slide through the door. After a moment he came across the room to Matt's table.

Your partner's waitin' fer you outside," he said. "Says he's got to see you. That it's important."

Matt lurched to his feet. "My partner? You sure?"

The man's dark eyes held a nervous, impatient gleam. "Yes. He's waitin' fer yuh out in the street. Better go see what he wants."

Matt continued his pretense of unsteadiness as he headed for the door. A moment later, as the batwings swung closed behind him, he paused, staring up and down the dark, deserted street. A rising moon cast a pale glow over the grotesque huddle of buildings.

He turned and started to walk along the street. As he passed the corner of the saloon, two dark shapes materialized out of the blackness and rushed him, their boots thudding heavily across the plank walk. He spun around, caught the glint of moonlight reflected from the barrel of a descending six-gun. He threw up an arm and tried to duck away. Then the night seemed to explode into a million pieces. . . .

The next thing Matt remembered was a coarse voice beside him saying, "I think he's comin' to already, Zeke. You couldn't of give him a very good rap."

MATT LAY for a while listening to the rumble of wagon-wheels beneath him before it dawned on him that he was sprawled in the jolting bed of a wagon moving along a rough, boulder-strewn trail. His hands were securely tied behind him, and it was a minute or two before he

got around to wondering how he had gotten here.

But he knew the answer instantly when he opened his eyes and saw the big man sitting on a wooden crate beside him, grinning down at him. His face was hardly more than a black mask against the cold glitter of the star-riddled heavens, but Matt felt rather than saw the evil intent in the narrowed eyes. The big man's hand rested almost carelessly on the butt of the six-shooter in his belt.

A deepening sense of alarm shot through Matt's body. Something had gone wrong with the plan he had outlined to Ben Gaines. Where was the silvery-haired Texan? Why hadn't he stepped in at the moment of attack? What was he waiting for?

He began remembering things about his partner. Ben Gaines' gentle eyes and easy drawl were hardly the indications of a fighting man. Suddenly the thought came to him of the time he had surprised the odd expression on the Texan's face. At the time, he hadn't known whether fear lay behind it. Now, remembering back, Matt could not see how it could have been anything else. A black despair settled over him.

Presently Matt heard the man beside him call, "All right, Zeke. You kin pull up here. I reckon this is as good a place as any."

The driver called out to his team and the wagon ground to a halt. Rough hands swung Matt down from the wagon, dumped him unceremoniously beside the road. The two men stood over him like huge vultures in the night. The big man had drawn his six-shooter.

Matt said bitterly, "So Jud Lister gave you orders to kill me? How many others has he murdered to keep his hold on Elizabeth City?"

There was a cruel grin on the big man's face. "Mister," he said, "you talk too much. But I aim to cure you of that bad

habit right now." He leered as he spoke.

Matt made a last despairing effort to free his wrists from the rope that bound them, then realizing its futility, desisted. He watched the gun in the big man's hand slowly come up.

It was at that moment that a voice drawled from the darkness, "Lift 'em, gents! Make a move and they'll be plantin' yuh in Boothill by mornin'!"

Even in the gloom, Matt could make out the astonishment in the faces of his two captors. The big man ripped out a savage curse and tensed as though intending to whirl around. But then he seemed to think better of it, for he let his six-gun slip through his fingers and raised his arms reluctantly.

Matt saw that a slender figure had moved from the pine thicket close to the road. He felt almost as surprised by the Texan's sudden appearance as Lister's men had been.

"You all right, Matt?" asked the Texan.

Matt said, "I reckon I am. But why'd you have to wait so long before hornin' in? I figgered something had happened to you or else you'd plumb forgotten about the whole thing and gone off to get yourself drunk. If my hair hasn't changed color, there's no thanks due you!"

"Sorry about that," said Ben Gaines. "Fact was, these two hombres jumped you so quick back in town I didn't git a chance to do nothin' about it. Then when I saw that you were out cold and that they were tyin' you up, showing that they didn't mean to harm you right away, I decided it might be better to wait a while and see what they were up to."

Ben moved to his partner's side, slipped a knife from his boot and sawed apart the rope that bound his hands. Matt climbed to his feet, rubbing his bloody, chafed wrists to restore circulation.

The Texan nodded at the two men. "What you figger on doin' with these

gents, Matt?" He gave the two a nudge.

"I have an idea these two know where our wagons are hidden. Mebbe they could be persuaded to do some talkin'. How about it, gents?"

Both the big man and Zeke stood stolid and silent, with no hint that they had even heard the question. They stared sullenly at the partners, an air of stubborn defiance in the set of their shoulders.

Matt Tobin said, "I'm not sure about the smaller feller, but I'm sure this other is one of the men who beat me up. I've always been curious to know what would have happened if I hadn't been drunk and if there hadn't been two of them. Seems like this is my chance to find out."

In the moonlight, the big man's brutal features held a surprised expression as Matt moved toward him. His eyes flicked to the gun in Ben Gaines' hand. "You wouldn't be so brave if yore partner wasn't holdin' a gun on me!" he snarled.

"Ben," Matt directed, "you're not to interfere between me and this gent. Our's is a purely private and personal matter."

The Texan frowned, but he said, "Jest as you say, Matt."

The big man gave a belligerent laugh. "I think I'm gonna enjoy this," he growled. He made a rush at Matt, his huge fists swinging wildly. But Matt ducked low and drove a blow to the man's mid-section that doubled him up. Slowly, deliberately, all his pent-up rage and frustration of the past hours lending savagery to his blows, he smashed both hands to the other's jaw, sent him reeling across the road.

The big man went down, and when he arose a moment later wiping blood from his cut lips, there was a mingled fear and rage in his eyes. He was more cautious now, but it did not avail him much. Matt rocked his head with short, well-aimed smashes. One of the big man's eyes was closed now, and his nose was smashed to a pulp. But there was nothing the matter

with the man's courage. Four times, Matt put him down and each time he staggered up again and lunged forward. But after a vicious right to the face that drove him to the ground for the fifth time he lay still, making no effort to get up.

For a moment Matt stared down at the bloody, battered bulk of the man. Then he turned, walked over to where Zeke was standing, grabbed him roughly by the shirt. He said, "You decided to tell us where those wagons are? Or do you want a dose of the same your partner got?"

In the pale moonlight, Zeke's face had a greenish tinge. He swallowed hard, staring at the sprawled figure a few yards away. "I—I'll tell you what you want to know," he gasped. "The wagons were taken to Bearcat Canyon. So help me, mister—that's the truth!"

Matt knew that the man wasn't lying. The fear that lay in his eyes, the palor of his features, was assurance of that. Matt said, "If I was you, hombre, I'd get the hell out of these parts and I wouldn't come back. The same goes for your partner. If I ever see either of you again—"

He left the threat unspoken, turned to Ben Gaines, "Come on, Ben. We got work to do." As they drove off in the wagon, Matt saw Zeke staring after them, the frightened look still in his eyes.

DAYLIGHT was breaking when they reached the entrance to the canyon. Leaving the wagon, the two men moved forward carefully on foot, guns in hand. They moved between steep walls of rock that shut away all but a narrow strip of blue sky overhead. Stepping around a peninsula of rock that jutted out into the canyon, they came suddenly on the stolen wagons. A man squatted by the fire, cooking his morning meal.

He looked up, a startled expression flitting across his face. Then his hand stirred into swift movement. The gun in Matt's hand blasted, and he saw the man

tumble forward onto his face. It wasn't until Matt saw the white curl of smoke drifting from the muzzle of the gun in Ben Gaines' hand that he realized his partner had fired at the same moment.

Matt watched the Texan, a tense, alert expression on his sun-darkened features, step forward and, with the toe of his boot, turn the sprawled figure on his back. He stared down at the bloody smear across the man's face. "This is one road agent ain't gonna practice his trade no more," he drawled. "Yuh got him square between the eyes."

Matt started to protest, then thought better of it. There was an odd uncertainty in his mind. Ben Gaines and he had fired at the same instant. One of them had missed. If it had been Matt's bullet that had felled the outlaw, it had been sheer luck. He had aimed for the man's body. . . .

Matt looked around. "There are the wagons. But what do you suppose they've done with the mules?"

Ben Gaines nodded at the timbered slope of the canyon beyond. "You might take a look up there. Meanwhile I'll be fixin' up a little breakfast."

Presently he came across a grassy clearing among the trees and found the mules enclosed in a crude brush corral the outlaws had erected. He turned and started back to camp to acquaint his partner with his discovery.

A moment later, stepping from the timber some distance from camp, he glimpsed something that brought him up short, jerked an astonished oath from his lips. Suddenly he started to run desperately down the gradual slope towards the camp, clawing his gun from his belt as he did so.

A party of horsemen had swept around the jutting rock that shut away a view of the lower valley. Matt recognized Jud Lister's ample-girthed figure among them,

saw that another was the bartender of the Last Chance. The other two were hard-visaged gunmen, undoubtedly the two outlaw companions of the man left to guard the wagons.

At sight of Ben Gaines, they pulled up their horses sharply, evidently as surprised to see him as he was to see them. It was this moment of surprise that gave the Texan a chance to straighten up.

Crashing echoes of the blasting gunfire bounced between the narrow walls of rock. It seemed that the whole canyon was filled with the thunder of guns. And then, suddenly, it was quiet.

The three huddled shapes on the ground lay very still. The bartender alone remained mounted. He held his arms high, and his face was gray with the fear of death.

LATER, as Matt and the Texan finished hitching the mules to the wagons, the younger man said, "I thought you said you were a rancher down there in Texas. Are all Texas ranchers as handy with their six-shooters as you are?"

The thin, silvery-haired man looked at him with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "Ranchin' wasn't all I done back there," he said. "I tried my hand at a number of different jobs afore I become a rancher. I was a sheriff fer about ten years an' afore that I was with the Rangers a spell."

"After what I just seen that don't surprise me none," said Matt. He shook his head soberly. "You know—up 'til now I had you pegged for an easy-goin', gentle kind of man!"

The Texan grinned, and his eyes seemed very soft and very mild. "That's the queer part about it, Matt. I reckon that's the kind o' man I allus figgered to be. But every once in a while I meet up with some varmints like Lister and 'em others. That's when I fergit the easy-goin' side of my nature!" . . .

COME BACK IN CHUNKS!

By Roy Vandergoot

When John Searls tangled with that roaring grizzly, he'd rather have picked a buzz-saw!

WHEN in the searing summer heat of 1864, John and Dennis Searles prospected the Mojave Valley and discovered the mammoth salt deposit, in the strange lake that bears their name little did the brothers dream that they had stumbled across a multi-million dollar industry. Still, they hoped that this white-encrusted saline lake might some day be worth something, and so they put up their monuments and filed location notices. Some time afterward, they sold out for enough to set each of them up in business. John Searles bought himself a ranch in the Sierra foothills.

John Searles was a man of frontier caliber. One time a band of Shoshones stole a bunch of John Searles' horses. Single-handed, John trailed the Shoshones across the desert into the Panamint range flanking Death Valley on the west. There, with his Henry rifle, John gave battle to the horse thieves. He killed four of them, wounded several others, and drove the rest into panic-stricken flight.

That fracas aroused awed respect for John among all who knew him. But his toughest fight came in March of 1870, when, in the High Sierras, John started out on a deer hunt.

John's weapon was a Spencer rifle. He had two boxes of ammunition with him, but when one box was nearly exhausted, he discovered that the other contained the wrong caliber cartridges. Only by trimming the lead could he force the cartridge in the Spencer's breech. And even so, it took at least two pulls on the trigger to dent the cartridge rim sufficiently to make it fire.

That didn't daunt John Searles in the least. Confidently he set out to bag himself another buck. However, the first thing he flushed was not a buck, but a bear.

Two of the good cartridges settled the silvertip's hash. But hardly had he fallen, then back of John an angry roar fairly shook the mountains. John whirled. A second grizzly was upon him. John fired. In his haste he missed, although the bear tumbled back, pawing its eyes, blinded by the powder flash.

John hurriedly forced a fresh cartridge in the Spencer's breech. The way that bear was carrying on showed that he wasn't dead yet by a long shot; nor would he ever be by the one John was frantically trying to press off. The cartridge happened to be one of the misfits. Three times John Searles pulled the trigger—and then the grizzly was upon him.

John poked the barrel in the bear's mouth. The grizzly slapped it aside. He bit John's face. He bit his throat to lay the jugular vein bare. Then he bit John's shoulder, tearing out a mouthful of flesh.

John fell and rolled over. The grizzly bit him again, this time tearing away a mouthful of coat.

John lay still. The bear, thinking him dead, ambled off, growling fiercely.

It was freezing weather, that high up in the Sierras. And that saved John Searles. The cold sealed up the veins of his horribly torn and mangled flesh. He managed to get up and walk to his horse. His jaw was broken, his throat torn, his left shoulder and arm ripped and useless. In that condition he traveled three days to Los Angeles, the nearest medical help.

Ride Back To Hell!

Whang-Leather Epic of the West
By Wayne D. Overholser



Cole's shot took the rider just as he was drawing down for another shot at the girl.

That proddy kid, Cole Rigdon, wasn't one to beat about the bush. It was his ranch and his range, but the more he got to know the ramrod his aging father had hired, the greater the stink became. And that gunslick segundo savvied. . . . Secure in the knowledge that his bloodstained reign was backed by more cold-deck killers than Cole could ever hope to chouse into a boothill corral!



The girl began to fall from the horse. She had been hit!

CHAPTER ONE

Return to Hat

AFTER four years Cole Rigdon was coming back to Hat, four years that had been a vacuum without news from home, for old Sam had never

been one to write. Now, with the years and most of the time behind, uncertainty became a great pressure within Cole. He leaned his head back against the plush seat, Stetson tipped forward, and it seemed to him he had never been on a slower train.

The twisting loops of Marshal Pass. The swift waters of the Gunnison and the pressing walls of the canyon. Then the Uncompahgre, the barren 'dobe hills that lined the eastern side of the valley with

brown and lifeless rows, the lofting skyline to the west, and Cole's pulse beat faster. Beyond was the San Miguel, and Hat.

Cole sat upright, Stetson pushed back. The train was slowing for Montrose. He pulled a suitcase down from the rack and moved along the aisle. There was a crowd by the depot. Jay Bellamy, Hat's ramrod, was there, but old Sam Rigdon wasn't in sight.

He was on the ground then, the train banging to a stop, and Bellamy was bulling his way through the crowd the way he always did, dark taciturn face expressionless.

"How are you, boy?" Bellamy held out a big hand.

"Smooth as a bull's horn." Cole took the foreman's hand. "Glad to be home."

Bellamy's speculative gaze swept Cole's hard-muscled figure and came back to his wide-jawed face. "You grew up, kid. You look a hell of a lot like the old man."

"He didn't come?"

Bellamy shook his head. "Sam's stove up some. Didn't he write?"

"No. Reckon nobody on Hat knows how to write."

"No, reckon none of us do at that." Bellamy jerked his head at the end of the depot. "Leave your valise in town. Old Billy's coming in with the buckboard in a few days. He'll pick it up."

Two horses were at the hitch rail, one a big black that had been a colt when Cole had left. "That's my horse," he'd told old Sam. "His name's Africa, and if he ain't here the day I get back, I'll gutshoot the man that took him."

Now Bellamy motioned to the black. "There's your horse, kid. The old man kept him for you like you said."

There was an edge of anger in the foreman's voice. Cole shot a glance at him. Jay Bellamy knew horses and he knew cows and he was loyal to Hat. That was enough the way old Sam saw it, but Cole

had never been sure. Even when he'd left, brash and loud-mouthed, a kid at twenty-one, he'd had his doubts, and he had them now, but there was no reading the heavy-boned face.

"Anything wrong, Jay?"

"The old man just kept the best horse on the ranch for you. That's all." Bellamy stepped up. "Let's ride."

Leaving Cole's suitcase at a hotel, they took the Dave Wood road out of town. Cole turned his gaze southward to the San Juan range that lifted a long row of granite peaks to the sky. They had always reminded him of a giant's snaggle-toothed grin when he was a kid. He said now, a little reverently as a man does when the familiar sights of childhood are pressed back upon him, "I've seen a lot of mountains since I left here, Jay, but nothing that can top them."

"Yeah," Bellamy grunted sourly. "You've been around, ain't you, kid?"

A FINE blade of anger knifed Cole. He wanted no trouble. There had been enough in the four years, smoky trouble that had made a man out of a kid. Before he had left Hat he had gone out of his way to seek it; he'd winked at death and reached for his guns. It had been his way to let the flame and singing lead settle any quarrel either big or little. Now he wanted nothing to mar his homecoming, for these moments were meaning more to him than he had dreamed they could when he'd left home.

Cole held his silence for a long time. The valley was summer hot. Then they were out of the cedars and pinons and in the close growing aspens. The air was windy cool and scented by mountain smells. The wind's passage made a low rumble; leaves danced in trembling rhythm. These were the sights and smells and sounds that Cole Rigdon had missed, that he had pictured a million times in memory. Now, when he should be enjoying this day above

all days, he found himself stirred by a violence of anger that he could not explain and had no tangible cause.

It was a feeling between him and Bellamy. He realized now that it had been there before he'd left. He hadn't taken time to understand it, for in those days he had never taken time to understand anything. The world was to be enjoyed by the minute, not to be worried about, and each day had contained as much whiskey and cards and women as twenty-four hours could hold.

Four years had taught Cole to rein down his temper, but it had taught him, too, that anger is dynamite with a slow fuse, that things had better be brought into the open and looked at than allowed to spread like a slow, killing cancer. He said now, his voice held even, "Something's eating on you, Jay. Let's have it."

Bellamy turned his dark eyes on him, a frown creasing his forehead. "What makes you think anything's eating on me, kid?"

Bellamy was thirty, and the five years between them did not give him sufficient seniority to call Cole kid. The pressure of growing rage thinned Cole's lips. Bellamy was baiting him. He didn't know what the purpose was, but he'd find out, and there'd be a day of settlement later.

"It's a bite in the air, like a fall frost," Cole said. He saw that Bellamy's right hand had dropped to gun butt, that his eyes held a bright wicked light. "Let it go, Jay."

"If you've got anything on your mind, spit it out," Bellamy grated. "And while we're at it, we'd better get one thing straight. I'm rodding the outfit. Don't figger that because you're the old man's kid, you're gonna call the turn."

Bellamy had never talked that way to him before because old Sam had insisted that Cole be given the right of way. "He'll grow up," old Sam used to say. "Every man sows his wild oats. Why, when I was a kid I was a regular hell raiser."

The point was that a kid was supposed to be a man when he was twenty-one, only that twenty-first birthday hadn't worked any miracle on Cole Rigdon. He'd have fought then if he'd heard half of what Bellamy had just said, and Bellamy was thinking he'd do it now. Cole laughed softly. That was where Jay Bellamy was wrong. He said, "You're the boss, Jay."

"I wish to hell you'd have stayed in Montana," Bellamy pressed, "or wherever you was. Your coming back ain't gonna do nothing but get the old man stirred up, and if anybody deserves the right to die in peace, it's him. I've ridden for him ever since I could fork a horse. He's the nearest thing to a father I ever knew, and I reckon I've been a hell of a lot nearer a son than you have. So help me, if you get into another jam, I'll gun whip you off the San Miguel."

That should have done it. Bellamy still sat turned in his saddle, right hand splayed over gun butt, his fury a dark shadow across a dark face. Cole saw then that Bellamy wanted to kill him, but he had to have an excuse.

"All right, Jay," Cole breathed, and put his gaze straight ahead.

BELLAMY cursed. Slowly he straightened in the saddle, hand falling away from gun butt. They rode in silence until they reached the canyon of the San Miguel; the road curled along the wall like a motionless twisted serpent. Then Bellamy said sourly, "The old man got bunged up last spring when a horse piled him. He ain't been off the place since."

Cole nodded and said nothing. Jay Bellamy was playing a game of his own making. He had always been popular with his men. Now, with the old man laid up, there would be no question of the riders' loyalty. Bellamy would have fired the men he didn't trust.

They came down to the river, the growl of it a never dying sound here at the

bottom. The ranchhouse was exactly as Cole had remembered, the corrals and barns, the huge cottonwoods. Superficially everything was unchanged, but Cole knew that under this pacid surface, nothing would be the same.

It was dusk now, the canyon rims black lines above them, blotting out the last of the sunlight. Old Billy Romaine came from a corral in his rolling walk, a gnarled hand outstretched. "Cole. Damn my eyes if it ain't Cole."

"Good to see you, Billy."

The old man's grip was tight and friendly. He stepped back, hand 'rumpling his white hair, faded eyes sweeping Cole. "You're bigger, son. Still packing your iron. Forget how to use 'em?"

"Reckon not."

Cole shot a glance at the glowering Bellamy and brought his eyes back to Romaine. The old man had been a gun-fighter in his day. He'd been in Dodge City and Abilene and the rest of the trail towns when hell had been dismissed for a holiday. He'd known Hickock and Master-son and the rest, and he'd taught Cole all he knew about gun craft. If there was anybody or anything on Hat still unchanged, it would be Billy Romaine.

"Then you'll get plenty of chance . . ."

"Get a move on," Bellamy snapped. "Take the horses and quit the palaver-ing."

More of the same. Bellamy knew what Billy and Cole thought of each other, but he was cutting it short. Cole swung toward the house, a rambling ugly structure designed for use, not beauty, for it had always been a womanless place. Cole's mother had died before Sam had brought his herd across the Continental Divide and settled on the Miguel.

The house was built of logs, the office and living room making the whole of the front. Now, pacing slowly across the bare dirt yard, Cole wondered why Sam was not out here to greet him.

Bellamy went in. He called, "Madge, light a lamp. Where's Sam?"

There was the tap of a woman's heels on the floor. A match came to life, the light bursting into the gloom of the house. She held the flame to the wick, slipped the chimney into place, and blew out the match. She looked up at Cole then, trying to force a smile onto her lips.

"You're Cole, aren't you? Welcome home."

"In case you haven't guessed it," Bellamy said dryly, "this is your step-mother."

It would have been the same if Bellamy had slugged Cole in the belly. He labored with his breath for a moment, eyes switching from the grimly watchful foreman to the woman and back.

"Come on, kid," Bellamy said. "She welcomed you home. Why don't you welcome her into the family?"

The woman came around the table and held out her hand. "Sam should have written, Cole, but he never got around to it. We were married at Christmas time."

Cole took her hand and dropped it almost immediately. "Glad to know you," he muttered.

Bellamy laughed softly. "Kiss her like a son ought to. Call her ma."

"Please don't, Cole." Her smile was like a bright moon rising suddenly into a black sky. "I'm just your age. Call me Madge."

She was pretty in a sultry kind of way, blue-eyed with chestnut hair pulled back and knotted loosely on her neck. Almost as tall as Cole, she was shapely and perfectly-proportioned, and she moved with an easy flowing grace as she turned and walked to the kitchen.

"The men have eaten," she said, "and Sam's sleeping. I'll get something for you two."

She was gone then. Cole heard her heels tapping across the kitchen floor, heard the stove lids rattle as she dropped wood into

the fire box. Cole turned to Bellamy. The foreman's saturnine face was as unreadable as a sandstone cliff. He said in a low tone, "Nobody writes on Hat, kid, but you heard the leaves whisper, didn't you? You knew the old man was about to cash in his chips, didn't you?"

It was the same old prodding. "No, I hadn't heard," Cole said.

"I think you're lying, but it don't make any difference. Madge gets the outfit, kid. You wasted your time coming home."

CHAPTER TWO

Double-Crossing Ramrod

THEY ate in the kitchen, the only sound the tap of Madge's heels as she waited on them, the rattle of dishes, the chomping as both men ate hungrily. Hostility lay upon them like a heavy, unseen blanket. A dozen questions prodded Cole's mind, but he put none of them into words. This called for a waiting game, so he'd wait it out. When he had a chance he'd learn from Billy Romaine what was going on.

Madge slipped from the room before they were done eating. Cole finished his pie and rose to pour another cup of coffee when Sam pattered into the room. He had pulled on his pants, but his shirt was only half buttoned, his white hair was sleep ruffled, and his feet were encased in slippers. He was still stocky and wide-chinned as he had always been; his eyes,

pinned on Cole, were as ruthless and bold as Cole had remembered them, but there was something else about the old man, a sort of hesitancy as if he had to turn to Bellamy for directions, that made him entirely different than the Sam Rigdon Cole had known.

"Hello, Dad," Cole said, and waited at the stove.

Sam ran a big-knuckled hand through his hair. "Howdy, son." He paused at the table beside Bellamy and motioned toward Madge who had come into kitchen behind him. "I reckon you met Madge."

Cole nodded. "I met her."

"Now you're gonna give me hell, ain't you?" Sam asked challengingly.

"No. She's mighty purty, Dad." Cole grinned and moved toward his father, hand outstretched. "It's your business. I'm just glad to be back."

"Well now, that's fine." Sam's grip was firm, a small smile touching his meaty lips. "I figgered you'd say I was an old fool, getting married after all these years." He pulled back a chair and sat down. "Pour me a cup of coffee, Madge." He rubbed his eyes. "Damn it, don't know why I have to sleep all day and all night, too. Sorry I wasn't there to meet the train, son, but I just don't get around much no more."

"That was all right, Dad. Jay was there."

"Yeah, Jay's always around when he's

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needed. Trouble is there's just too much to do any more. I set out to build an empire, Cole, and damned if I didn't do it." Sam shook his great head. "You'll find Hat beef anywhere from the San Juan range to the La Sal country, all over the Horsefly country and plumb past the Cone. Don't even know how many cows I've got."

"You're making money," Bellamy said quietly.

"Making money and working you to death." Sam drank his coffee. "Glad you're back, Cole, if you're aiming to settle down. No more hell raising. You sowed your wild oats and raised a damned good crop."

"We're still harvesting 'em," Bellamy said significantly.

"What's behind is behind." Sam pushed back his cup. "Now what I want to know is this. Cole, are you ready to take on a man's job?"

Cole sat down. He said quietly, "I'm ready."

"Ah, that's fine." It was the old Sam now, big fists on the table, great shoulders bent forward. "I made this outfit for you, son. It's cattle country. Never be anything else. The grangers can plow up the plains, but they ain't gonna plow up our mesas. I'll kill the first damned son that sticks a plow into the ground."

"There is such a thing as the Homestead Law," Cole said.

"Not on the Miguel there ain't," Sam bellowed, his fist pounding the table until the dishes jumped. "Get that straight now, Cole. There's plenty here for you and Madge both. I ain't gonna be around much longer. Never live through another winter. I'm glad you're back while I'm still alive so I can see what kind of man you turned out to be."

Cole leaned back in his chair, fingers twisting a smoke. "I can take care of myself," he said.

"Hell, you always could. Women, liq-

uor, and guns. Tough when you were fifteen, and I let you go because you was so spoiled I didn't know what to do. Then you killed that gambler and it took some dinero to fix it. I told you that was the windup, so you lit out. Best thing that could have happened for either one of us." He wagged a big finger at Cole. "There's talk that the Flagg bunch is holed up on the Dolores. Maybe so. Hat stomps its own snakes and Hat will handle the sod busters. Oh, we've got a few little outfits around, but that's different. No grangers. That's the law. I made it and you're gonna help enforce it."

Cole struck a match and held the flame to his cigarette. He didn't like this. Four years of wandering had taught him several things, and one of them was the irresistible power that stemmed from the nesters' dogged courage. One would die under a cowman's gun, or a dozen, but still they would come, and only the country itself could beat them.

Bellamy was watching, attention fixed on the old man. Madge had come to stand beside Sam. Now he reached out and putting an arm around her, drew her to him.

"You can find Hat cattle a hundred miles from here. That's what I'm leaving you and Madge, half of it's yours and half of it's hers. That's fair, ain't it, son?"

Cole nodded. "That's fair."

"Just don't forget one thing. If it wasn't for Jay here," he motioned toward Bellamy, "Hat wouldn't be what it is today. Long as he wants a job its here for him. If he gets a hankering to start his own outfit down the river on a spot he's got picked out, Hat'll give him a boost. Understand that, Cole?"

Cole nodded. Jay Bellamy had done his job well, but Cole's return had messed everything up for him.

"You're a white man, Sam," Bellamy said.

"White man, hell," Sam snorted.

"You've earned anything you've got while my own kid was out getting an education." He looked up at Madge. "No fool like an old fool. Never thought I'd have a woman around . . ." He rubbed his face. "Guess I'll go back to bed."

"I'll be there in a minute, Sam." She waited until he had pattered back across the room and closed the door. She said then, "Your old room is ready, Cole. I cleaned it up today, but I didn't change a thing. If there's anything you want . . ."

"There won't be."

She nodded and turning, left the room. Cole rose and started toward the door. Bellamy called, "Where you going, kid?"

"None of your damned business," Cole grated, and left the house.

THE SKY was cloudless and set with stars. A half moon had cleared the canyon rim, its light washing the bottom with a vague whiteness. The night was still warm, the canyon husbanding the day's heat. Lamplight from the bunkhouse windows and open door made its yellow patches on the earth. Cole, pausing under the cottonwoods, heard the murmur of talk, the whisper of cards, and made up his mind. They would be Bellamy's men, not Sam Rigdon's. All but old Billy Romaine.

Cole eased his gun in its casing and turned toward the bunkhouse. His appearance might start a fight. It depended on Bellamy's orders, and there was no way for Cole to determine the way the ramrod aimed to play it until his acts pointed the direction.

Moving swiftly and silently, Cole ducked under the bunkhouse windows and stepped through the doorway. Four men were playing poker at a table in the middle of the room. The air was thick with smoke and whiskey smell was a stench in the room. The hands did their drinking in town when Cole had left four years ago, not in the bunkhouse.

For a moment Cole stood motionless just at the edge of the bright core of light from the wall lamp, making his study of them. Three were run-of-the-mill cowhands, all strangers to Cole. The fourth was a stranger, too, but he wasn't run of the mill. Big, meaty-nosed, and pale-eyed, the fellow was as tough looking as any hardcase Cole had ever seen.

The big man was the first to see Cole. He was shuffling, thick fingers moving easily and gracefully. He would be fast with gun or knife, Cole thought, for all of his great size. Suddenly aware of another's presence, he raised his eyes. He sat motionless for a dozen seconds. Then thick lips pulled away from yellow teeth. The two top front ones were gone, Cole saw.

"The kid," the big man rasped. "The old man's kid come back to rod the outfit."

"You all the boys that's here?" Cole asked.

"Yeah, we're all. Ain't we enough?"

"Plenty," Cole answered, and stepped back into the darkness. He waited until he was sure they would not follow, then he moved away from the bunkhouse and through the cottonwoods toward the river. Billy Romaine should have been there. The old man's absence both puzzled and worried him.

Cole hunkered at the edge of the river, the smooth liquid rush of the water a dimly heard refrain. The last hour had multiplied the questions in his mind rather than lessened them. A sense of frustration washed through him. He was like a blind man beating his head against a solid wall. He couldn't prove anything against Bellamy or the woman. If he could, Sam wouldn't believe it.

The minutes slid into an hour and then two, but ponder the things he had seen today as he would, he could find no answers. Only one thing was clear. Jay Bellamy wanted him dead. Perhaps

Madge did, too. The safest thing to do was to saddle up Africa and ride out, but taking the safest way had never been Cole Rigdon's habit. He rose, tossed his cigarette stub into the river and turned toward the house, a sprawling black shape before him. He had almost reached it when he heard Bellamy say sharply, "What's the matter with you? The old devil's asleep, ain't he?"

Cole stopped in a cottonwood's thick shadow. It was Madge and Bellamy, two vague figures at the corner of the house.

"It isn't right, Jay. I married him. I'll be his wife as long as he's alive."

"Oh hell," Bellamy said indignantly. "You ain't getting a conscience, are you?"

"Maybe. He's a good man, Jay. The best man I ever knew, and I think Cole is like him."

"Cole won't live long enough for you to see what he's like."

"You can't do that, Jay. We'll play it out the way it is."

Bellamy laughed shortly. "For half? Not me, Madge. We'll take it all. Now quit being so damned good . . ."

"Jay. Go on back to the bunkhouse."

Cole saw her move away from the foreman, saw Bellamy grip her and pull her to him. It had been in Cole's mind to let time give him the answers, to push no fight until he knew what he needed to know. Now he forgot that, for anger, building in him from the moment Jay Bellamy had met the train, exploded into violent action.

Bellamy was kissing Madge, her fists futilely beating at his back. Cole crossed the yard in quick silent steps. He said, "So that's the way it is, Jay."

Bellamy pushed the woman away, and began to curse Cole in a hard rasping voice. Cole hit him then, a wicked right that exploded on the ramrod's chin with the impact of a mule kick. Bellamy sprawled on the ground, rolled over, and coming to a sitting position, grabbed for

his gun. Cole fell on him, and knocked him flat, knees driving wind out of him in a yeasty sigh.

Bellamy's shoulders dropped back to the ground, fists slashing upward at Cole, but they were wild blows, without sting or purpose. It was involuntary action the same as his twists and turns and kicks, the instinctive acts of a cornered animal. Cole was steadily pounding the foreman's face into a bloody pulp. He felt the meaty nose flatten, the turn of the big man's head as a fist caught him on one side and then the other.

Cole heard Madge scream, a man growl, "Shut up." Cole came to his feet, hand gripping gun butt and turned. Then the sky dropped on him and he fell, full out.

CHAPTER THREE

Granger Invasion

IT WAS still dark when Cole came to. He felt his head, the bandage around it, the hard crust of blood that had dribbled down the side of his face. He was in bed. The door of his room was open, a hint of light showing from the hall. Somebody was talking. The words at first ran into a meaningless blur of sound. Then, as Cole's head cleared, he recognized Bellamy's voice.

"You won't kill him tonight, I said."

"You were aiming to drill him on the way here from Montrose," the other said. "What the hell's the use of waiting?"

"That was different. The old man hadn't seen him. I could have explained it, said somebody drygulched him. Now we've got to play it out. Cole will get drunk and the old man'll be finished with him. Go on back to bed now. The next time he tackles me, get there a little sooner."

Footsteps faded along the hall. The light died. Cole tried to think of what he had heard, but he could not force his

mind to focus his thoughts, and presently he dropped into an aching sleep. It might have been a minute or an hour. He had no way of knowing. The squeak of a loose floor board woke him. He reached for his gun, turning on his side so that he faced the door. Then he relaxed and lay still, for a vagrant beam of moonlight showed him that it was Madge.

The woman knelt at his bed. She whispered, "You all right, Cole?"

"Just a headache."

"You've got to get out. I'll get a horse for you."

"I just got home."

"But you can't stay. Bellamy will kill you if you do."

"Maybe you've got your own reasons for wanting me to drift," he said sharply. "Like working on Dad to change the will so you'll get all of Hat. Isn't that Bellamy's game? Then you and him can get hitched."

He heard her long breath, saw her fists clench on the side of the bed. "It's Bellamy's game, Cole. Not mine. You think I'm no good. Maybe I haven't been, but I want to be now. Living here with Sam, having decent clothes and enough to eat and all the money I need without having to beg a man for it has changed me. I'd like to return a little of it."

"Like getting me out of the way?" Cole prodded.

"I want to save your life. Can't you believe me?"

"No, I sure as hell can't," he said brutally. "I've got you pegged right down to a gnat's eyebrow."

A sob broke out of her throat. "I can't help you if you don't believe me," she whispered, and slipped out of the room.

He slept again, bright daylight beaming at him through the window before he woke. He took off his head bandage and went down stairs, wondering if Bellamy was around and how he'd explain his bruised face to Sam. But Bellamy wasn't

in sight. Sam sat in the kitchen watching Madge peel potatoes. She smiled brightly at Cole and said, "Good morning," in a warm friendly tone. Sam grunted a greeting, his wide face dour, eyes suspicious. Cole said, "Howdy," and went on to the back porch.

A hell of a homecoming, Cole thought sourly. In the old days he'd had a free rein to come and go as he wanted. Work when he felt like it. Spend all the money he could. As far as Sam went, he could do nothing wrong. Now it was different. Everything was different. Cole could understand Bellamy and Madge; he couldn't understand his father.

Cole washed his face, rubbing away the dried blood on his cheek. When he stepped back into the kitchen, Madge said, "Your breakfast will be ready in a minute. Coffee's on the table."

"Guess you ain't changed much," Sam growled. "You used to sleep till noon."

"Looks like you've changed more'n I have," Cole said as he sat down.

"What do you mean?" Sam bristled.

"You didn't exactly get the band out to welcome me home. Billy was happier to see me than you were, I guess."

Sam choked. "Damn it, boy, what do you expect? You left home, didn't you? Lit a shuck just when I needed you. I spend my life building up the outfit for you, and what do I get? A kid who rides off and stays for four years."

COLE drank his coffee, eyeing Sam over the rim of his cup, wondering what caused the old man's truculence and finding no good reason for it. Madge was standing at the stove frying bacon, her eyes on him. She said now, "He's home, Sam. It's like you said last night. What's behind is behind. I don't want to feel that I've come between you."

"Hell, you ain't," Sam growled. He rubbed his head as if he was tired. "It's just that my pup turned out to be a house

dog. Go ahead and eat, Cole." He rose and lumbered into the front room.

Madge brought Cole's bacon to the table. "You've got to overlook some things. Sam isn't well and he's worried."

"What's he got to worry about?"

"Nesters. There's been trouble on the river and on the mesa south of here."

Cole ate quickly, the desire growing in him to throw his saddle on Africa and ride out. Hostility was a pressure around him. He pushed back his plate and rose. Madge said softly, "Bellamy got marked up last night. He didn't want Sam to see him that way, so he rode out. You won't have any trouble for a day or two."

"Where's Billy Romaine?"

Her lips tightened; her breasts rose and fell with her breathing. "I . . . I'm not sure. I haven't seen him since you got here."

Cole turned into the front room, a premonition of disaster sliding down his spine like the passage of a cold snake. Billy Romaine was his one friend, and Billy was gone. If Bellamy had killed him . . .

Sam was sitting on the front porch, eyes fixed on a dust cloud that was rising along the river above the house. Hunkering down on the porch, Cole rolled a smoke. He said, "That hombre's sure pushing his horse."

"Trouble," Sam groaned. "That's Big Nose Jones. He wouldn't ride like that if it wasn't trouble."

A moment later the man thundered into the yard, but it wasn't until he pulled his horse up in a rolling dust cloud that Cole recognized him as the big hardcase he'd seen in the bunkhouse the night before.

"Grangers," the big man bawled. "A whole damned colony of 'em. Forty wagons or more."

Sam got to his feet. He gripped a post, great shoulders sagging. "Forty wagons," he muttered. "They'll plow up the range from here to hell-and-gone." He straight-

ened and laid his gaze on the rider. "You say anything to 'em?"

"Ain't my business to jump 'em."

"Any of the boys around?"

"Case, Lane, and Ridge are waiting at the ford. I told 'em to stay there till I saw you."

"Four," Sam muttered. He wheeled on Cole then, shoulders back, the old fire in his eyes. "All right, son. This is your chore. You take them four boys and turn the wagons back."

Forty wagons meant forty men. Probably more. Even if the grangers weren't fighting men, five cowhands weren't enough to stop them. Sam would know that as well as Cole. He was watching Cole now, eyes narrowed, a hand rubbing the back of his great neck.

"I'll go have a palaver," Cole said.

"You'll turn 'em back," Sam grunted. "Let the nesters get a toe in the door, and there ain't nothing left of Hat."

"I'll go have a palaver," Cole repeated, and stepped down from the porch.

"You used to go out of the way to get into a fight," Sam bawled. "You'd spit in a cougar's eye just to see him blink. You turned woman?"

Cole's face mirrored his anger, but he didn't turn back. He saddled Africa, hands trembling a little. His father wanted him killed. He stepped up and rode past the house. Sam was still standing there, but Cole didn't look at him. Sam wanted him killed. That was the only way he could explain the job he'd been given.

Ridicule! Contempt! Scorn! All of it had been there in the old man's words and voice. Maybe Cole had been a punk kid who had got into one jam as fast as he got out of another, but he'd come back a man, willing to take his share of the burdens. He hadn't had a chance. Jay Bellamy and maybe Madge had seen to that.

Last night Sam had been friendly. He

wasn't this morning. Something had happened, and Cole wondered if Madge had lied, if Bellamy had talked to Sam before he'd ridden out.

Jones fell in beside Cole. He said bluntly, "I don't know what you're figuring on, kid, but don't start no ruckus. I ain't getting a sodbuster bullet in my guts just to keep old Sam's grass from being ploughed up."

Cole gave no sign he'd heard. A moment later they reached the ford and the three hands Jones had left here rode out of the brush and swung in behind them. One asked, "What'd the old man say, Fanner?"

Jones cursed. "Where'd you get that handle, Lane? Big Nose Jones. That's me."

"Sure, sure. What'd the old man say?"

"Told the kid to throw the wagons back." Jones chuckled. "But I told the kid not to start no scrap."

"Yeah, that's right," Lane grunted. "I'm keeping my hide in good shape for a sheriff's slug."

Cole didn't look at them. These men were outlaws, not cowhands. They didn't belong on Hat, but even four good men behind him wouldn't be enough to turn back forty wagons. That was something mighty queer, too. Nester families usually came alone. Or in twos and threes. Not forty at a time.

They rounded a turn in the canyon. There was the caravan, strung along the road as far upstream as Cole could see, dust from wheels and hoofs rising into the motionless air. Cole held up his hand and stopped. Jones and the rest reined up behind him. Jones grunted, "Don't start nothing, kid, or I'll drill you in the back."

Three riders were ahead of the wagons. When they saw Cole and the others, the one in the middle position said something and giggling their mounts, they came forward at a fast pace. They pulled up within

a dozen yards of Cole. Then he saw that the one on his left was a girl, and an uncommonly pretty one at that. She was small and dark-eyed with curly black hair that lay tousled on her head. Full-bosomed and shapely, she rode as if she had been born in a saddle. It was as surprising to find her with a nester outfit as it was to find a cactus blossom in a gray desert.

"It's my guess that is Hat's welcoming committee," the girl said scornfully. "Neighborly, aren't they, Dad?"

The middle rider grinned bleakly. "Right neighborly." He was small and black-eyed, a quick-moving nervous man who pinned his gaze boldly on Cole's face. "Or maybe you've got another name for it, Po."

Po! The name struck Cole like the slap of an open palm. The man on the right was a gunman. The bone-handled Colts thonged low on his thighs branded him for what he was. Tall. Handsome if fine features on a man's face made him handsome. Blue eyes that swung challengingly from Cole to the men behind him. The only Po that Cole had ever heard of was the notorious killer, Po Anse, and he made his guess that this was Anse.

"Yeah, I've got another name or two," the gunman murmured. He nodded at Jones. "Howdy, Fanner."

"You got me wrong," Jones shouted in sudden and unexplainable rage. "I'm Big Nose Jones. Don't know why folks keep calling me Fanner."

The tall gunman grinned. "Why now, you favor a gent I know, Jones."

"I'm Cole Rigdon." Cole nodded at the small man. "My father owns Hat. Maybe you've heard of the outfit."

"Sorry to say we have," the other snapped. "I'm Bert Davis, President of the San Miguel Colonizing Company." He motioned to the girl beside him. "My daughter, Emily Davis." His hand swung toward the gunman. "Po Anse. Perhaps you've heard of him."

"I've heard nothing good," Cole said softly.

Cole waited, eyes on the gunman, right hand close to gun butt. Something was wrong here. Po Anse was as out of place as a wolf in a band of sheep. Anse tensed, bold eyes going glass-brittle. He said, his words as softly pitched as Cole's, "If you've heard of me, you're not real bright to say that."

"No, I ain't bright." Cole motioned toward the long line of wagons moving slowly toward them. "If I was, I'd save my breath. Don't come in here, Davis. It'll mean a war. Go back to the Uncompahgre valley where there's good land waiting to be settled."

Davis shook his head. "The good land was taken soon as the reservation was opened up. We're pioneering, Rigdon, and as pioneers we'll take the best. We sent scouts out last summer. Three came here, but only one came back. You killed the other two."

The girl's lips curled contemptuously. "You expect him to admit that, Dad?"

"I expect him to admit nothing," Davis said coldly. "I'm telling him the way things are. You should have killed all three, Rigdon. The one who got back brought us word that this was the place we were looking for. So, knowing we were heading into a war, we hired Po Anse to lead us. We have sixty men and boys capable of bearing arms. This land," he motioned to the mesa south of the river, "is open to entry. We're breaking no law by settling there."

"You're not breaking what you call law," Cole said shortly, "but there's one thing you ain't figgered on. The only law on the Miguel is six-gun law."

"We figgered on that." Anse patted his gun butts. "The way to stay inside that kind of law is to get your iron smoking before the other fellow does. I'm a fair hand at that."

"So I've heard." Cole pinned his gaze

on the little man. "Guns don't settle the big things that have to be settled in the long run, Davis. The country does that."

"You can keep your advice," Davis flung back. "We scouted the land like I told you and we're settling on the mesa south of the river. We're carrying fifty thousand dollars in gold in our wagons. That'll keep us going until the land becomes productive. We'll build permanently, Rigdon. We'll dig ditches. We'll build homes and a church and a school. We'll give something to this country that your twenty thousand cows never will."

"Fifty thousand in gold," Cole murmured thoughtfully, "and you're telling everybody you see. You're a fool, Davis."

The little man's eyes darkened. "Nobody will steal it. We're not afraid of you nor your men."

"We won't steal your gold," Cole snapped, "but there are men hiding out on this range who will. Maybe you've heard of Fanner Flagg's bunch?"

"Flagg?" Po Anse waved the idea aside. "Just a two-bit operator, friend. A big noise. Paw and beller. That's all."

"You're a damned liar," Big Nose Jones bawled. "Why, Fanner Flagg would have you for breakfast every morning."

FANNER! One of Hat's riders had called Jones that. Then Po Anse had called him the same. *Big Nose Jones was Fanner Flagg*. Cole felt that disturbing chill ravel down his spine again. It was fantastic, but possible, as possible as a man like Po Anse, being with the nester colony.

"In any case," Davis was saying coldly, "we are not worrying about Flagg or Hat. Now get out of the way. We're going through."

For a moment Cole hesitated, knowing there was nothing more he could do, but hating to think what his father would say when he got back to Hat. He nodded, raised his Stetson to the girl, a quick

gallant gesture that brought a smile from unfriendly lips, and turned his horse. He said, "You've had your warning, Davis."

Jones held his silence until they were past the ford. Then he said in a taunting voice, "So you ain't such a big noise after all, kid."

"I'm just taking time to get a good breath before I make my noise." Cole paused, gaze pinned on the man before he added, "You'll hear it later, Flagg."

Jones pulled at his nose, uncertainty gripping him. Then he said, "I ain't Flagg. I'm Jones."

"So you say," Cole grunted, and let it go at that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Powderstroke

FANNER FLAGG and his man poisoning as cowhands. Po Anse leading a nester colony. And Jay Bellamy and the woman, Madge, playing out their carefully planned scheme. It all added up to a pattern of robbery and murder, and Cole Rigdon was helpless to prevent it.

As he rode back to Hat the temptation was strong in him to ride on. Four years ago he would have done exactly that, but this was a different Cole Rigdon. He did not fully realize that himself, for he was not one to analyze his own thoughts and emotions. He only knew he had a job thrown into his lap that couldn't be done, yet somehow he had to do it.

Old Sam was still on the porch when Cole racked his black in front of the house. Big Nose Jones murmured, "I guess we'll go along to see the show, kid. Ought to be good."

"It will be." Stepping around the hitch pole, Cole strode across the dirt yard.

"Well?" Sam rumbled. "They heading back over the divide?"

"No." Cole motioned across the river. "They're going to try it on the mesa."

Sam blew out a gusty breath and reared to his feet. "I told you to turn 'em back."

"They've got sixty men. You think five of us could turn 'em back?"

Sam swore. "I would if I could fork a horse, or I'd cash in my chips trying. Jay said you didn't have the makings of a man, and he sure as hell was right."

"No guts at all, boss," Jones put in. "Didn't even get tough."

Cole wheeled on him, gun whipping from holster in a fast smooth draw. "This is none of your business, Flagg. Get out and take your bunch with you."

"Flagg?" Sam bellowed. "What're you talking about?"

"I don't know what's going on," Cole grated, "but there's plenty of it. Po Anse is leading the nester outfit. If I ain't plumb wrong, this hombre calling himself Big Nose Jones is Fanner Flagg. Punching cows ain't his line, so reckon he's got something else up his sleeve, which same we'll find out before we're done. Go on, mister. Drift."

"Stay here, Jones," Sam bawled. "Jay's gonna need every gun we've got when he runs the nesters out of the country. I won't send a boy to do a man's chore again."

"Git," Cole said.

Flagg backed away toward the hitch rail. "He's got the drop on us, boss. Reckon we'd better mosey."

Sam began to curse. "Damn you, Cole. If I had a gun . . ."

"He's your son," Madge said. "Have you forgotten that?"

"Yes, and I'll never remember it again," Sam raged. "You find Jay, Jones. Tell him he was right about Cole. Tell him Cole's leaving Hat for good."

Jones was in the saddle now. "I'll tell him, boss." Grinning wickedly, he turned his horse downstream, the three others behind him.

Cole wheeled to face his father. "All right. If I ain't welcome here, I ain't

staying," he said in a dead level tone. "You can tear your will up and leave all of Hat to Madge. That's what she and Bellamy want."

"No, Cole," Madge cried. "Sam, you're wrong about Cole. You know he couldn't do anything against sixty men. Not with Po Anse leading them."

Sam thrust the thought aside with a wave of his big hand. "I claim no son who can't handle a bunch of nesters." He slumped into his chair, head back against the leather. "Funny thing. Jay's been the kind of boy I hoped you'd be. My own fault maybe. Gave you everything you wanted. Now you ain't worth a damn."

"You can think what you want to," Cole said in that same dead tone, "but you're going to hear some things that you're too blind to see. Bellamy hired Jones and them other three, didn't he? You ain't got a day's work out of the bunch of 'em since they got here, have you?"

"That's right," Madge said.

"The nester wagon train is toting fifty thousand dollars in gold," Cole went on. "You've always kept some here. How much have you got?"

"I ain't telling you nothing," Sam grated, "and I ain't believing none of your lies. Get on that black horse and slope out of here. Don't never come back."

"I'm going," Cole said, "but I'm coming back if Bellamy doesn't kill me first. I'm guessing when I say Anse and Flagg rigged this play so they could raid the wagon train and grab your dinero, but it adds up. This other part I know. Bellamy aimed to kill me after we left Montrose, but I wouldn't give him an excuse. When I got here, Billy wanted to tell me something, only Bellamy didn't give him a chance." He paused, eyes whipping from Sam to Madge and back to Sam. "Where is Billy now?"

"Horsefly maybe," Sam muttered.

"Spends most of his time out there."

"I doubt it like hell," Cole said bluntly. "I think Bellamy killed him. If he did, I'll kill Bellamy. That's a promise."

"You swap lead with Jay, and you'll be in hell yourself," Sam said without conviction.

"One more thing," Cole breathed. "Bellamy aims to kill you. Then he'll marry Madge and he'll have Hat. He brought Madge here, didn't he?"

Sam went rigid, jaw muscles cording, eyes burning with a wild destroying fury. He came slowly to his feet, great hands fisted, and took a step toward Cole. "If I had a gun on me, I'd drill you," he whispered. "I'll listen to no more lies like that from you."

"No, and I don't reckon you'll listen to anything I have said. You've always figured there were just two ways, your way and the wrong way. You'll send Bellamy and every cowhand you can bring in from the range after the nesters and men will get killed because you're too damned stubborn to listen. Then Bellamy will get you."

Cole wheeled toward his black, misery a corrosive stream within him. There were a dozen things he wanted to say, that he'd come back to be the kind of son he should have been when he left, come back to do his share of the work that had to be done, to lift some of the burden from Sam's shoulders. But most of all he wanted to say that he had found out what home could mean and he wanted Hat to be home, he wanted Sam to know he loved him the way a son should love a father.

But Cole could say none of those things. Sam had slammed the door and locked it. Bellamy and perhaps Madge had filled him with a poison. If there was an antidote for that poison, Cole did not know what it was.

"Cole, don't go." Madge ran across the yard to him. "When this trouble with the nesters is over, he'll understand."

He was in the saddle then and looking down at her. He didn't trust himself to speak for a moment. For months he had lived in anticipation this first day when he'd be home again, but it had never been like this in his dreams.

"Come back here, Madge," Sam bawled.

"He'll never understand," Cole said hoarsely. "Not unless he can see with his own eyes what Bellamy is up to. Or unless you tell him, and I reckon you wouldn't do that."

There was no sultry beauty about her now. She was a frightened puzzled woman, fighting through to a decision, and not yet knowing what it would be. She breathed, "I love him, Cole. I didn't at first. I came here to do the thing you believe, but I changed. I can't tell him now, or he wouldn't love me. Can't you see that?"

"Madge, get back here," Sam roared.

She might be telling the truth. Cole, staring down at her, wasn't sure, but he was sure of one thing. With her help he could do the job that had to be done.

"Yes, I can see that," he said.

"Don't leave the river, Cole. Where will you camp?"

"Above the ford in the cottonwoods."

"I'll be there after dark."

Sam, filled with a fury that was past all reason, lurched down the steps from the porch and stumbled toward Madge. Cole turned his black upstream and cracked the steel to him. He didn't look back. His father's face, stormy black, was burned into his mind.

THERE was nothing to hold him here.

Nothing but love for a father who had said he would kill him if he had a gun. Yet he would stay and fight it out until Sam Rigdon knew the kind of man Jay Bellamy was. Only then would there be peace within him, only then would he have partly made up for the misery he had

given Sam during his own blind years

Cole found a break in the north canyon wall and forced his black up the red boulder-strewn slope. He wanted no trouble now with the nesters. This was something he had to wait out. If Madge came tonight, she might be able to fill in some of the missing parts of the pattern. If she didn't, luck would be his only ally. Or if she betrayed him to Bellamy, he would die tonight below the red sandstone wall of the canyon, and his best hope would be that Jay Bellamy would die with him.

Reaching the rim, Cole followed it until he was above the nester caravan. He dismounted and tying his black under a pinon, hunkered behind a screen of scrub oak and watched the wagon train. Neither Po Anse nor the girl were in sight. Davis, the colony leader, was waiting at the ford.

It was a long day for Cole Rigdon, watching there from the rim. The caravan moved with aggravating slowness across the river and up the narrow road that twisted its ribbon-like course to the top. Wagons and horses, straining into their collars, showed the weariness of many miles. Futile, perhaps, but still a courageous try for new homes, and with all the miles of graze between the San Juan mountains and the La Sals, there was no good reason for Hat to fight them.

Cole's eyes searched continuously along the line of wagons for Emily Davis, but the dark-eyed girl was nowhere to be seen, and her absence brought a vague worry to him. He had never seen a woman like her before. Now that he had seen her he could not forget her. He thought then with gray discontent that she would never be more than a passing memory to him. A Rigdon and a nester woman! No, it could never be more than a wish, a hope, a small bright light in a memory that held too much darkness.

It was not until dusk that the last wagon had dropped over the south rim and Cole

left his place behind the scrub oak. He put his horse across the ford and followed the south bank to a grove of ancient cottonwoods. He would give Madge this chance. He had not decided on his next move if she didn't come. There was no reason for Bellamy to hurry. The thing he had counted on had happened. But Sam would insist on the attack on the wagon train, and that might come tonight.

Cole built a smoke and touched a match to it. Night lay all about now, relieved only by tiny stars in a black and distant sky. Tension gripped him until his nerves were ready to scream like an overtight fiddle string. Waiting was not his game, but he knew it was the only way he could play his hand. Hunting Jay Bellamy down and killing him would only make the gap between him and his father permanent. Now, with the slow passage of the minutes, he realized how much depended on Madge.

He heard the thunder of hoofs first. Then the gunshot. Horses were coming upstream on the road across the river. Cole threw his cigarette away and stepped into the saddle. He waited, having no idea what it meant. Then the first horse hit the ford, hoofs driving water upward and out in slashing waves.

"Cole." It was Madge's voice, high and terrified. "Cole."

The rider behind her was closer now, a second shot hammering into the night. Madge's scream was one of pain then and she went out of her saddle in a rolling fall. Cole's .45 thundered into the dying gun echoes, targetting the other shot. Three times, each hard upon the other.

It was too dark to see what damage he had done. He rode out of the cottonwoods, eyes searching the darkness. Madge's horse had bolted on across the river and into the trees. The second, saddle empty, bucked by. One of Cole's shots had hit, but he had no way of guessing how badly the man was hurt.

Madge was on her feet now, hand clutching her right arm. "Cole! Did you get him?"

He rode on across the river, calling, "Get down," and put his horse up the opposite bank. He saw the man then, sprawled back of the willows, one hand under him, the other outflung. Keeping him under his gun, Cole stepped down. The man didn't move. Kneeling at his side, Cole struck a match. It was one of Flagg's bunch, the one called Lane.

Cole mounted and rode back to Madge. "How bad are you hit?"

"Just in the arm. Cole, is he . . ."

"He's dead. What happened?"

"Jay can't hold Flagg back, now that the wagon train's here. They're going after the nesters' gold and then get Sam's. They'll kill him. Bellamy will be safe. He'll blame it onto Flagg. Sam tore up the will after you left and wrote another one leaving all of Hat to me. I couldn't stop him, Cole."

"That's all right." Cole struck a match and looked at her wound. "Just a scratch. You're more scared than hurt."

She gripped his arm. "You've got to stop them, Cole. Sam still doesn't know what Jay's planned. He was asleep when I left. I was riding out when Lane heard me. I didn't stop when he told me to so he chased me."

"Bellamy would be right put out if you were killed," Cole said dryly. "How many of them are there?"

"Eleven," she said. "Ten now with Lane dead. Flagg sent down the river for the rest of his bunch."

"You say they'll tackle the wagons first?"

"It won't be a fight. Po Anse rode in this evening with a nester girl. It'll cost the nesters fifty thousand to get her back."

That, then, was the reason she hadn't been with the caravan. He said, "I'll get your horse."

"I can't go back," she cried. "Even

Jay couldn't save me. They'll miss Lane and they'll guess."

"We ain't going back to Hat for awhile."

He brought her horse and helped her into the saddle. "We'll get a bandage on that arm. You'll be all right."

She didn't say anything until he had mounted. Then she asked almost hysterically, "Are you going to let them kill Sam?"

"I'm a fair hand with a six, Madge, but not good enough to take ten of them."

"Don't you trust me yet, Cole? Can't you see why I risked my life coming after you tonight?"

"I ain't real sure."

"I told you I loved Sam," she said simply. "He's old and he's stubborn and he's a fool to trust Jay, but he's given me the only security I've ever known. If his own son won't help him, who will?"

"He's gonna get a stummick full of Jay Bellamy before I help him," Cole said grimly.

"By that time it'll be too late."

"I reckon not. Besides, there's a girl to think of first. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To ask the nesters for help. If we get out of this alive, dad's gonna have a tough time forgetting it was the nesters who saved his life."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunman's Death

COLE saw the caravan the moment he and Madge topped the rim. It had made night camp, a dozen cooking fires making red holes in the night, but as Cole rode up, he saw that most of the nesters were massed around a big blaze at the end of the wagon square. They heard the horses, and the tight ring broke away from the fire with only Po Anse and Bert Davis standing between Cole and the

flames. Cole began to walk forward.

"Sing out," Anse called.

Surprise and then disappointment rolled through Cole. Davis still hadn't pegged the gunman for what he was.

"Stay out here till I get the smell of things," Cole told Madge, and rode on into the firelight. "I want to talk to Davis."

"Hell, it's young Rigdon," Anse ejaculated. "He's a bigger fool than I figgered he was."

"I ain't as big a fool as the bunch that hired you," Cole said, and stepping down, walked boldly to the fire. "Looks to me like you're a fool, too, Anse. You look as big as a horse, standing there in front of the fire."

"Hell, I can take you in the dark," Anse said contemptuously. "Stay out of this, boys. I'll trim him down myself."

"I've got something to say before you do any trimming," Cole snapped. "Davis, this is something you'd never believe a Rigdon would do, but the way things are working out, I can't help it. I want ten of your best men. I've got to have their help to save my father's life."

They stared at him in silence for a moment, unbelievably, Davis bug-eyed. It was Anse who broke the silence with a short laugh. "I heard some of the damndest fairy stories when I was a kid, Bert, but here's one that tops 'em all. We ain't swallowing it, Rigdon. Smells like a trap to me. Draw or drag."

Davis grabbed his arm. "Hold on, Po. What are you getting at, Rigdon?"

"Where's your girl?" Cole shot back.

"Hell, you ought to know," Davis shrilled. "Some of your hands kidnapped her and want fifty thousand dollars ransom money. That's what we're having this meeting about."

"Purty damned plain," a burly farmer growled. "That's all the dinero we've got. Steal that and we're licked. We'll get off your range. A new wrinkle, Rig-

don, to save you from running us off."

"She's being held at Hat," Cole agreed, "but it isn't a new wrinkle. I reckon there's been road agents of one kind or another since hell got the first fires going. That's all Fanner Flagg is and all he wants is the fifty thousand, but there's more going on than that." Keeping his eyes on Anse, he called, "Madge."

She rode into the firelight holding her bullet-scratched arm, hair in disarray, face a mirror of all the conflicting hopes and fears that were in her.

"This is Mrs. Sam Rigdon," Cole said. "I've been gone four years. Just got back yesterday. Mrs. Rigdon can tell you what's going on better than I can."

"Get her out of here," Anse bawled. "It's a trick, Bert, a lousy stinking trick. They'll raid our wagons while the boys are gone."

"You told me you had sixty men, Davis," Cole said sharply. "I'm asking for ten. Our own hands are strung all over the western slope. I haven't got time to go after them. You can get your girl back and you'll save Sam Rigdon's life."

"He's talking loco now," Anse cried. "Who wants to save old Rigdon's life?"

"It might pay," Davis said thoughtfully. "He'd have to be meaner even than I've heard if he made it tough for us after we done that."

"You want to hear what's been happening on Hat?" Cole demanded. "Want to hear what your man Anse is figgering on?"

"We'll listen," Davis said.

"I ain't listening," Po Anse screamed, and went for his gun.

Cole had expected it. This was something Anse could not afford for the nesters to hear. Like most gunmen, he was a man of passion, of trouble, born to it and raised by it, and his guns were the only things he trusted. Problems were to be fought out, not thought through. Now, as Cole knew he must, he turned to his guns.

Cole's right hand swept down with the first hint of Anse's draw. Fingers closed over the gun handle, gripped it, and lifted it; all in a smooth lightning-fast draw, speed that came from long practice, savvy that was the result of old Billy Romaine's teaching. He felt the solid buck of the gun, the impact traveling the length of his arm. Powder flame danced from the muzzle of his .45, a foot-long orange tongue leaping into the night and dying as the thunder of the gun rolled into the silence.

There was only the one shot. A second would have been a waste of powder, for Cole had beaten the gunslick to the draw. The last echo died before Anse, fingers loosening their grip on his Colt butt, began to wilt. He went down into the dust then, one hand flung above his head and gripping in death the mesa dirt these people had come to claim.

It took a moment for the colonists to believe this thing they had seen, for Po Anse, with fine arrogance, had claimed to be the fastest man on Colorado's western slope. Now he was dead, and the son of old Sam Rigdon had done the job. A growl rose from fifty throats and men began moving toward Cole in a solid hostile mass.

Davis wheeled on them. "Stand back," he shouted. "Rigdon had to do it. You saw Anse force the fight." They stopped, still dark of face and menacing as Davis turned again to Cole. "What do you want to tell us, Rigdon?"

Cole motioned to Madge. "Go ahead, Madge."

THERE was misery in her face as she looked down at Cole. He understood then that she couldn't bring herself to tell her own part in it, not even to save Sam Rigdon's life. She started to talk and choked off into a shoulder-shaking sob.

"What did Flagg and Anse figger on?"

Cole pressed, his voice low and hard.

"They rigged it up weeks ago," Madge told them, her voice shaky. "Anse was in Kansas when you started. He heard about the gold you carried. That was why he asked for a job. He got word to Flagg who was hiding out here. They'd just robbed a bank in Utah. Bellamy, that's Hat's ramrod, knew Flagg before. He told them my husband always kept a lot of money in his house, forty thousand or more."

"How do you know all this?" Davis asked sharply.

"I heard some of it tonight. Some of it I've known, but I couldn't tell my husband what I suspected because he won't believe anything against Bellamy. Tonight I tried to get away to find Cole to tell him what they were planning to do, but one of Flagg's men took after me. He'd have killed me if Cole hadn't shot him."

"She got tagged in the arm," Cole said. "You'll believe a bullet hole, won't you? Or a dead man? You'll find one the other side of the ford."

Davis believed, but Davis had a girl who was in danger of her life. Cole couldn't be sure about the others. His gaze swung around the circle of faces, good faces of honest men who had traveled a long and lonely trail. Now they were bound to hold this land if they had to die to do it.

"All right," Davis said. "We'll go with you, Rigdon, but if Emily loses her life, or if your father takes this opportunity to attack our outfit, I'll see that you don't live the night out."

"Fair enough," Cole said. "Count out your men."

Davis swung back to the colonists and called off the names. When he was done, he said, "Saddle up. See that you have both Winchesters and hand guns. Hollister, you'll be in charge here until we return. Keep a guard out. Don't let yourself be surprised. Put ten men around the

treasure wagon. If it really is Fanner Flagg who has Emily, the gold it what he wants. If it's a smart trick Rigdon thought up to divide us, he'll try to wipe the train out. We'll come back if we hear any shooting. Detail two men to bury Anse."

"Do you have anybody who can take care of Mrs. Rigdon's wound?" Cole asked.

Davis motioned to a bearded man in a black suit. "We have a doctor with us. Have a look at her, Doc. Then you'd better come with us."

Fifteen minutes later a grim cavalcade swung down the narrow road to the river, Cole and Bert Davis in front. Cole knew that he wasn't fully trusted, but Madge had stayed with the wagon train, a hostage that Davis counted on to insure his daughter's protection.

Before they reached the bottom of the canyon, Cole described the position of the buildings and corrals. "Mrs. Rigdon said your girl is being held in a log cabin behind the bunkhouse. I can get to it without being seen. While I'm doing that, you ride in and start pow-wow-ing with Flagg. Don't start the shooting until I let you know the girl's free. I'm asking one thing. See that my father isn't hurt."

"It will not be our intent to hurt him," Davis said stiffly.

"How much time did they give you?"

"Until midnight."

"How did they get your daughter?"

"She had ridden ahead with Anse to look at the mesa. A band of Hat riders surprised Anse and took her. He brought back the message."

"Anse and Flagg had rigged the play beforehand," Cole said grimly. "Your outfit was too big to handle."

"I'm afraid you're right," Davis agreed reluctantly. "We hired Po Anse at Fort Wallace before we started for Colorado. His references looked good, but he must have faked them."

They reached the river and crossed before Cole said, "Flagg will have a guard out. Pull up here."

"Flagg won't expect a fight," Davis said quickly. "Anse was trying to talk us into sending the money."

"A man with Flagg's record doesn't live as long as he has without being careful. Give me fifteen minutes start before you ride in."

Davis cuffed back his hat and scratched his head, staring at Cole in the thin light. "This don't make good sense," he said finally. "If Flagg got our money, we'd have to leave the country. That's what Sam Rigdon wants, isn't it?"

"Sam Rigdon is no outlaw," Cole said quietly. "He'd send his men in with their guns smoking. Right now his life is in as much danger as your daughter's."

Cole reined his horse downstream, riding boldly along the road, knowing that he was playing a tight game with death. What happened depended upon the orders Flagg had given the guard, but Flagg, expecting someone from the wagon train, would not likely have ordered his man to shoot before he talked.

It worked as Cole had foreseen. He was within a quarter of a mile from the ranchhouse when a man in the willows called, "Who is it?"

Cole reined up. He was sure he wouldn't be recognized. He had pulled his Stetson low over his forehead, and the night was black here at the bottom of the canyon. He said, his tone held to an unnatural, low note, "Who's asking?"

There was silence for a moment, the only sound a faint rustle of the wind through the trees. Cole could make out the vague outline of the guard behind the fringe of willows. He had drawn his own gun. He felt the tension of uncertainty grip him. Flagg's man would have no scruples about shooting him out of the saddle if he thought the gold was in his possession.

"Reckon it ain't none of your business who I am," the guard said finally. "You got the dinero?"

"We're not as big a pack of fools as you figgered," Cole said in his assumed bass voice. "Davis sent me to see that the girl's all right."

Another tight moment of silence played out its dragging seconds before the guard said, "All right. Go ahead. Maybe the boss will let you see the girl."

"If I ride on, they'll plug me and talk later," Cole pointed out. "You come along."

The guard cursed. "I'm supposed to stay here so your outfit won't send a bunch in to shoot hell out of us."

Cole laughed. "Thanks for the compliment, mister, but we're farmers, not gunmen. Besides, you've got the girl. We ain't taking no chances on her getting killed."

The guard rode out of the willows, cursing softly, not yet fully convinced. Because of the darkness, and perhaps due to his own mental searching, he failed to sense Cole's move. The black horse swung in close beside the guard's mount, Cole's left arm swept around the man's neck and tightened while his right gripped the outlaw's gun wrist. Cole dragged him out of the saddle and across his own and upended him on the ground.

The guard's wind was knocked out of him. He lay motionless for an instant, gasping in his effort to suck air back into tortured lungs. Cole stepped down and bringing his gun barrel slashing across his head, knocked the last vestige of consciousness from him. It took another minute to tie him and roll him back into the willows. Then, with the guard's gun in his waistband, he rode on.

Lamplight gleamed in the ranchhouse windows. Lane was dead. The guard was out of the fight. That left nine, still too long odds for one man, and Davis' nesters would be uncertain help at best.

There would be another guard with the girl, Cole guessed. Eight in the house, every one but Jay Bellamy a tough rider of the back trails, and Bellamy would hold his own in the finish fight.

There was only one way for Cole to play it, and time was running out. He should have told Davis to wait half an hour instead of fifteen minutes. He reined his horse toward the canyon wall and rode as far as he could and still keep inside the fringe of brush cover. He stepped down then and pausing a moment, listened. There was no sound but the wind and the growl of the river to break the night silence. Then he heard horses and knew that his fifteen minutes were up. Davis was coming in.

Cole ran then, keeping low and circling the house. The log cabin was a small black shape before him. He continued to circle, slowing his pace and moving without sound, eyes searching for the guard that Flagg must have placed here. There was a commotion in front of the house, and Flagg called, "Come in and talk, mister."

Cole had reached the front of the cabin then. Still no sign of a guard. He slid along the front wall to the door. The padlock was open, the door ajar. Slipping into the room, Cole struck a match. The cabin was empty. Madge had lied about where the girl was hidden!

FOR A MOMENT Cole stood there, motionless, while something died within him. Emily Davis might not be within ten miles of here. She could have been taken to one of a dozen cabins down the river or on the mesa. She might be in any of the sheds or barns or one of the vacant rooms in the house.

There wasn't time to look for the girl, even if he was lucky enough to stay out of Flagg's hands. But the part that hurt most was Madge's perfidy. He had at last come to trust her, and now he called him-

self a fool. She wasn't playing Bellamy's game; she was playing her own.

He could do nothing here. Slipping out of the cabin, he ran toward the house. A man appeared out of the shadows, called, "Who is it?" and cried out immediately, "Rigdon." He fired, the thunder of his shot deafening. Cole cut him down with a single bullet, scooping up the man's gun, and raced on.

It was trouble now. Men spilled out of the front of the house and lunged around it, Fanner Flagg's yell carrying after them, "One of Davis's men. Bring him in, Ridge."

Cole was through the back door before the owlhoot pack reached the rear of the house. He stood in the kitchen, breathing hard, gun still palmed. He heard Sam bawl, "I told you, Jay, that this nester outfit had to be chased off the mesa. Damnedest thing I ever heard of, claiming we kidnapped his girl. That ain't Hat's way of clearing its range, mister."

Cole catfooted across the kitchen. Everything was wrong now. If Emily Davis had been in the cabin as Madge had said, Cole could have freed her and with the nesters help, smoked it out with Fanner Flagg and his men, but as long as the outlaws held the girl, the reins were in their hands.

Cole stopped at the door leading into the front room, gun hip high. The door was ajar, and Cole, looking through the narrow opening, saw that Davis and his men were backed against the front wall. Flagg and two of his outlaw packs were holding guns on them. Bellamy was leaning against the wall beside the fireplace, a sardonic grin on his dark face. Old Sam Rigdon stood in the center of the room, pants pulled over his drawers, hair mussed as if he'd just got out of bed.

"Go ahead and plug me," Davis grunted, "but I'd like to know one thing before you do. Was young Rigdon on the level?"

"Was it his idea fetching you here?" Flagg asked.

"That's right."

Flagg laughed. "He was on the level, but we outguessed him. We figured you'd try something like this. That's why we got you inside. If that's him circulating around in back, the boys'll bring him in. With you and the girl both under our guns, you won't be sending for your outfit, and they'll get the dinero to us pronto."

Sam Rigdon wheeled to face Flagg. "What kind of hogwash are you putting out, Jones?"

Flagg laughed again. "Tell him, Jay. You're one huckleberry he'll believe."

"Yeah, I reckon he'll believe anything I tell him," Bellamy said callously. "You're in for a tough time, Sam. This gent you call Jones is Fanner Flagg. He's got Davis's girl. He's aiming to swap for the nesters' gold. Likewise they're gonna work you over till you tell 'em where yours is. Then they'll be on their way and you'll be dead."

"And Jay will marry your purty widow," Flagg taunted. "Hell, we're wasting time. Davis, write out an order for your dinero and send one of your men after it. If it don't come this time, we'll rub out you and the girl and your boys. Jay, get out of the old man where he keeps his pile."

Sam Rigdon looked more like a ghost than a man. His gnarled hands opened and closed. Breath came out of him in short pants. "Jay, you ain't on the level? He didn't mean what he said about you marrying Madge?"

"He sure as held did," Bellamy growled. "Why do you think I spent my best years making an outfit out of Hat? Why do you think I brought Madge here in the first place?"

"You've blowed off enough," Flagg snarled. "I told you to get his dinero." He jerked a sheet of paper from Davis's hands and scanned it. "All right, sod-

buster. Get your man on his bronc and tell him to split the breeze. I aim to be ten miles down the river afore morning."

Cole, watching from the door, had never felt more pity for anybody in his life than he did now for his father. Sam Rigdon's world had been knocked loose from its moorings. "Jay, Jay," the old man groaned, "I've treated you better than I have my own son. And Madge. I . . . I love her."

Bellamy struck Sam across the face with an open palm. "Where's the dinero?"

Something broke in Cole then. The smart thing was to stand here until he could break in with a fair chance of smoking Bellamy and Flagg down, to wait until Flagg's men were scattered and the odds were a little more even, but there was no waiting for Cole Rigdon now. He kicked the door open, his gun lined on Bellamy.

"Hook the ceiling, Bellamy," Cole raged. "Gutshooting is too good for an hombre who'd crack an old man, even if he wasn't Sam Rigdon."

Slowly Bellamy turned, color fading out of his face. He tongued his lips, eyes flicking to Flagg and back to Cole. His hands came up as he stepped away from Sam. Relief broke across the nesters' faces and faded, for Flagg was shaking in silent mirth. He said, "You're sure a hero, Rigdon, but even a hero can make a mistake. Look at the bedroom door."

A man stood there, Winchester on the ready. He was Fanner Flagg's ace in the hole.

"You plug Bellamy," Flagg said carelessly, "and my man drills your pa. That the way you want it?"

It would go exactly that way. Cole nor no other man was fast enough to swing his gun from Bellamy to the man in the doorway and kill him before the Winchester jolted life from Sam Rigdon. Or if he could, there would still be Flagg and Bellamy and the two others.

"No, I don't want it that way," Cole said hoarsely.

"Put your gun on the table," Flagg ordered. "Maybe you'll get around to making a try for it after while. I'm funny that way, Rigdon. Never like to salivate a man unless he's got some kind of a chance, and I sure as hell aim to salivate you before we're finished in these parts."

Cole slowly obeyed. He had made the same inexcusable mistake Davis and his men had, but there was a difference. This wasn't a nester game. It was his. He'd been raised with a Colt in his hand and the smell of powder smoke in his nostrils. Still he'd stepped into it. He moved back to the wall, a cold hand pressing against his diaphragm. This was the windup. An hour of life. Perhaps two. Davis and his girl and the rest of the nesters might live, but both Rigdons would die.

"All right," Flagg said briskly. "Now everything's jake. I was a mite worried about you, Rigdon. Never like to have somebody around loose." He swung to face Davis. "You man get started yet?"

"No."

"Well, damn you," Flagg bawled. "I'm done playing. Which one you sending?"

Davis hesitated, eyes swinging briefly and accusingly to Cole. He muttered, "Sims. Tell 'em how it is."

"And don't get no idea about sending another army in here," Flagg warned. "One sign of that and I'll finish this whole bunch."

One of the nesters rose, took the paper Flagg gave him and folding it, slipped it into his coat pocket. "Maybe you'll get our money, mister," he said ominously, "but we'll follow you to . . ."

Flagg hit him. His ponderous fist slammed the nester through the door and sent him rolling across the porch. "Get riding," Flagg roared. "Follow us to hell if you want to, but get that dinero back here pronto."

Flagg waited in the doorway until the

sound of hoofs died up the river. Then he swung to face Bellamy. "This is the damndest slowest outfit I ever saw. Bellamy, I've told you . . ."

"All right," Sam Rigdon breathed. "I'll get it. I got no need of it and nothing to live for now, but I want to know something first."

Flagg drew a cigar from his pocket. He worried off the end, pale blue eyes holding a trace of amusement. Cole, shoulder blades pressed against the wall, watched him closely, noticing things about the man he had not seen before: the tufts of black hair on the backs of his hands, the scar curving along his neck below his right ear, but the thing that shocked Cole was the sheer brutality that could be clearly seen in his eyes.

"Go ahead, old man," Flagg said.

"What you said about Madge. I . . . I don't believe it." Sam, still gripping the table as if the strength to hold him upright had gone from his legs, brought his eyes to Cole. "Are they lying to me, Cole?"

In this moment, with everything he had placed his trust in washed out from under him like sand before a swirling flood, he held to one faint hope, and he had turned to his son to sustain that hope. There was none of the old ruthlessness in Sam Rigdon now, none of the arrogance, none of the bitterness and rage and fury he had shown that morning when he had said he'd kill Cole if he had a gun. He was old and sick and broken, a shell of what had once been a strong driving man.

Cole hesitated, wishing he could say the thing Sam wanted him to say. Half an hour ago he could have, but not now, not after finding the cabin empty and knowing Madge had lied about where the girl was being held.

"Well," Flagg said harshly. "You gonna lie for the old man to make him feel good?"

Cole thought, "Why not?" A few minutes left to live. Madge had brought

something to Sam he had not known through all the tough years since Cole's mother had died, a small happiness to a rough and turbulent life, a happiness that Cole himself had failed to bring. He opened his mouth to say that they were lying about Madge, but he didn't give voice to the words. Three men pounded around the house and into the room.

"The girl's gone," one of them bawled, "and Jenkins is shot dead."

Flagg stood chewing on his cold cigar as he thought about what he had heard. "Rigdon's work, I reckon, before he walked in on us." He strode across the room to Cole. "Where is she?"

Then Emily Davis had been held in the cabin. Madge had told the truth. Cole looked squarely at his father. "They were lying, Dad," he said. "Madge was brought here by Bellamy so you'd marry her and they figured to get you to change your will so all of Hat went to her. Then they'd kill you and Bellamy would marry her, but Madge couldn't go through with it. She . . ."

Flagg hit Cole on the side of the head and knocked him off his feet. A boot toe caught Cole in the ribs. "Where's the girl?"

Cole shook his head and sat up. "I don't know. The door was unlocked when I got there."

"Don't lie to me." Flagg drew back his foot to kick again.

"I don't reckon he's lying, boss," one of the men cut in. "The padlock wasn't locked. Rigdon wouldn't have a key."

"Romaine," Bellamy said thoughtfully. "He's got a key."

"I'll kill that old rooster," Flagg belated. He started toward Sam. "You got your answer. Madge double-crossed Bellamy, but that ain't got nothing to do with me. Only one think I want in this whole damned world. Gold, and it's easier to steal it than earn it. Now go after it."

"Yeah," Sam breathed. "Sure." He

looked at Cole who was sitting up now, and it was as if a dying man had suddenly tightened his grip on life. "Thanks, boy."

Sam strode out of the room, shoulders back, chin up. Bellamy picked up a lamp and followed him, two of Flagg's men close behind. Cole came to his feet, rubbing the side of his face where Flagg had hit him. He had been close to being knocked out, but the room had stopped turning now. His gun was still on the table top, half a dozen paces away. Too far, but if a man must die, it had better be with a blazing gun in his hand than like a pigeon on a barn roof.

The minutes dragged by in slow procession. Then Sam returned, Bellamy behind him, gun prodding him in the back. Flagg's men brought the clinking sacks of gold coins and stacked them on the table. Cole, looking at Bellamy's mocking face, knew that time had run out. If Sam had made some kind of diversion, Cole would have had a chance for the gun on the table, but the new life that had straightened the old man's shoulders had not come from the hope that he might live. It was Cole's words that had changed him, Cole's assurance that Madge wasn't playing Bellamy's game.

"How much?" Flagg asked.

"Thirty thousand," Bellamy said.

The outlaw winked. "Not so bad, Jay. With the fifty thousand from the nesters, it'll be better than a bank job. A good swap for you, too. A cheap price for Hat."

Bellamy scowled. "If I get my hands on that damned Madge."

Flagg reached for his gun as he swung to face Cole. "You want to drill this huckleberry, Jay?"

"You can have the job," Bellamy said.

Flagg shrugged. "You're soft, friend. Don't pay . . ." The outlaw's gun, half raised, stopped as the pound of hoofs came to him. "Now what the hell is that?"

Couldn't be the nester coming back with the dinero yet."

Flagg strode to the door, motioning for his men to follow. Only the man with the Winchester kept his place in the doorway. Cole tensed his muscles for a try at his gun. Running feet pattered on the packed dirt of the yard. Then Sam cried out and Flagg swore in disbelief. It was Madge, hair down her back, face bloody where limbs had slashed her.

"Sam, Sam, you all right?"

More horses were thundering down the road. A dozen or more from the sound. Flagg started to curse in a flat hard tone. "Watch your woman, Bellamy," the outlaw snarled. "If this is some of your hands, keep 'em in line."

Madge had thrown her arms around Sam and kissed him. They're fixing to beef me," the old man babbled.

"You damned little tramp," Bellamy snarled. "I've got a way of . . ."

Madge jumped at him, both hands ripping at him, finger nails slashing his face. Flagg and the rest were at the door, still not knowing who was coming. The man in the doorway was laughing at Bellamy. There would never be a better time. Cole leaped for the table and scooped up the gun just as the man in the doorway threw a slug at him.

Cole's right leg felt as if somebody had swiped it with a club. It gave with him, but he didn't go down. He grabbed the

table, his weight on his left leg, and drove a bullet into the heart of the man in the doorway.

Guns roared from outside. Flagg and his men returned the fire, but now that the rifleman in the doorway was out of the fight, there was nobody to watch Davis and his nesters. In cold death-defying courage they charged the outlaw pack with no better weapons than their fists. Flagg's men whirled to meet the attack, blasted lead at the nesters, but still they came. Some of them died and some fell with bullets in them and lived, but in the end there were too many for the outlaw bunch.

Cole had no eyes for the fight on the other side of the room. He knew only that Bellamy was behind him, Jay Bellamy whose fine web of schemes and lies was finally failing, Jay Bellamy who had wanted to kill him that first day he'd ridden home. Cole pivoted on his left leg, hammer back. Madge was lying on the floor where Bellamy had knocked her. Sam, grappling with Bellamy, was between him and Cole.

Forgetting his right leg, Cole took a step to the side and fell. Bellamy, knocking Sam away from him, pulled his gun and fired point blank at Cole. It was Madge who saved Cole's life. She rolled, foot sweeping out to crack Bellamy on the shin.

Cole heard the slug rip into the floor



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within a foot of his head. Then his gun was tilted up and the hammer fell. Bellamy faded back through the balloon of smoke and crashed to the floor. Cole tried to sit up, tried to hold his gun on Bellamy, for he wasn't certain whether the man was dead, but the strength was not in him. He fell sideways, head rapping the floor, and the light were blotted out for Cole Rigdon.

The first person Cole saw when he came to was dark-eyed Emily Davis. He was in his room, right leg swathed in bandages, and it was still night. Emily was at the bureau slipping a piece of paper next to the lamp chimney so the light would be shaded. Turning, she saw that Cole's eyes were open. She said, "I heard you were looking for me."

She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and now the idea of a Rigdon and a nester girl falling in love seemed perfectly logical. He asked, "Where were you?"

"On the rim. Billy Romaine got me out. He'd been hiding after you got home because he knew Bellamy didn't want him to see you. Billy knew too much. He saw them lock me up, so as soon as it was dark, he got me out. Then we heard the shooting, and came down." She smiled. "That's all, except that I'm sorry I misjudged you when we met on the road. Billy's been telling me what a wonderful fellow you are."

He grinned. "I hope you'll believe him. And what about Flagg and Bellamy?"

"Dead. So are most of their men. The rest are a long ways from here by now."

"Your dad?"

"He's all right. So's the doctor. If he hadn't been, you'd be dead. You lost a lot of blood." She turned toward the door. "Your father wants to see you."

"Sure."

He was tired. No sense to it. Just a nick in the leg, but he felt as if his eyelids

were too heavy to stay open. It was easier to think of Emily Davis with his eyes shut. When he opened them, Sam and Madge were standing there.

"I've been a fool," Sam said bluntly, "which don't excuse me. I got no excuses. Just been a fool. Believed all he said."

"I know how it was," Madge said slowly. "Sam had big dreams for you, Cole. I know. He's told me more than he knows he has. You just didn't grow up like he thought you would. Then you went away and didn't come back, and Jay was here."

"Talking smooth and rubbing my leg like a purring cat," Sam snorted.

"All the time he was poisoning Sam about you," Madge went on. "Like he did after Sam went to bed the first night you were home."

"I wondered about that," Cole said. "You weren't the same the next morning."

"I found out I'm not as old as I thought. Been sleeping too much." Sam grinned sheepishly. "Reckon a good fight was just the thing I needed. Regular damned tonic." He held out his hand. "Son, if you can forget the things I said since you got home, I want you to rod the outfit."

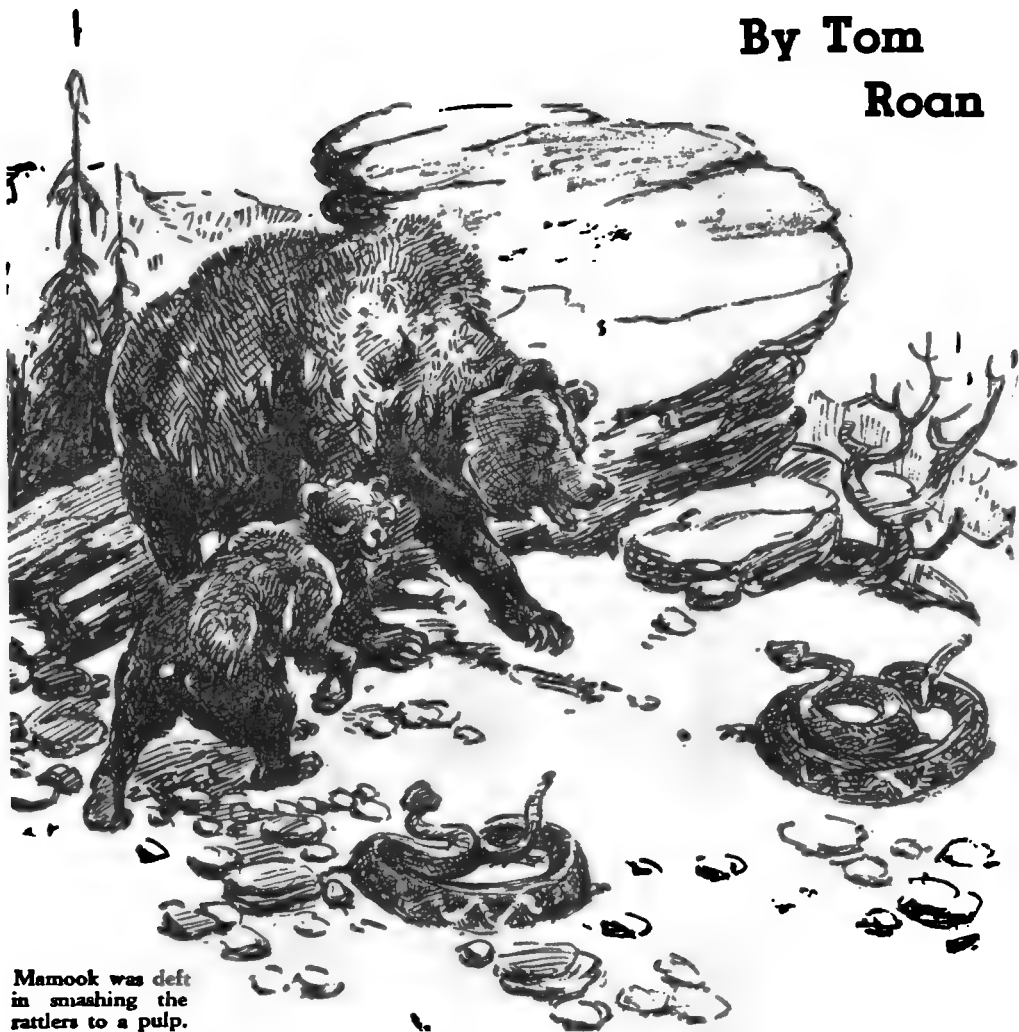
"Just one thing," Cole said as he gripped his father's hand. "I ain't in favor of fighting nesters like you are. We've got enough grass. Let's make a deal. We'll buy their hay. They'll buy our beef."

Sam scratched his cheek and nodded slowly. "Davis seems to be a right kind of a gent. I reckon that's a deal. Fact is, we'd never have got out of this mess if that nester bunch hadn't been chasing Madge after she got away from 'em."

Madge pulled Sam out of the room. Cole's eyes were closed, but he wasn't asleep. He was thinking about dark-eyed black-haired Emily Davis. Now that he had nothing to do but lie here and dream about her.

Queen of the High Crag

By Tom
Roan



Mamook was deft in smashing the rattlers to a pulp.

Ringed in by the deadly guns of a hundred hunters, Mamook the Mighty, grizzly ruler of the high crags, knew that if she and her cub were to escape the leaden hail from those greedy men-creatures, she would need the help of one man. . . . The little dude hunter, rash enough to chase her until she caught him, and throw him back among his fellows while she broke free!

SHE STOOD on the ledge, looking down in the early morning light, watching the angry flood of yellow, muddy water beating and roaring into the great, elbow bend in the western wall of the mile-high cliffs. It was the usual spouting, whistling and snarling flood that marked the full-bursting of spring spilling itself over towering Gunsight Pass, a picture as old as life to Mamook the Mighty, ruler of the dizzy crags, majestic in her huge grizzly-fashion, standing more

than nine feet from nose tip to tail tip and weighing close to twelve hundred pounds. A long-sought prize for every hunter's eye, she was battle-scarred from a dozen rifle bullets.

Porky, the year-old cub, was doing a little private scratching and grunting behind her. Always the greedy one, he came forward with an impatient poke of his nose at her stern and a growl that was as good as saying that it was long past time for his breakfast and high old time for his mother to set about the business of finding it and handing it over.

Mamook gave him a backward paw-stroke to the side of the head that would have knocked a mule down when he nipped her on the right flank. It sent him sprawling back on the ledge, four feet in the air with a wail of supposedly great pain and everlastingly wounded dignity.

It was then that Mamook, the nip still stinging, turned and poked her nose to Porky's nose. With a very few growls, right paw threatening another slap, she as good as told him in the language of the grizzly kingdom that it was long past the time for him to cease his ever-nagging and whining, even time now for him to start thinking of the business of beginning to shift for himself, the world owing no one board and room without a little effort. Before the end of the year he would have to be doing just that, spat out of the old den and sent grumbling away to hunt one of his own, a grizzly mother not being fool enough to spend her entire life licking his face and feet, especially when it came to such a lazy loafer who wanted to sit on his rump and scratch or merely to trail along and whine for the best of everything, always the hungry-gut not willing to turn a strong young paw to a thing while the mother procured every ounce of the food.

Food was plentiful, if only one had the get-up and would learn the simple know-how of going and getting it. For instance, there were always the fat and quarrelsome

big rattlesnakes in the old den on top of the cliffs, up there for years now and merely for the taking if one called by the den in the morning when the sun was warm on the rocks. Other bears of the bear family shunned them, but not so when it came to a grizzly with a belly-urge for a toothsome bite. The know-how of getting them was most important, a thing she had been trying to teach the cub all last spring and summer and well into the fall, and too often in the middle of the teaching seeing him scratching his rump and looking in another direction.

A neat, lightning paw-stroke at the right instant could crush a darting scaly head to a pulp as quickly as all get-out, but it had to come exactly at the end of the snake's strike, or it would inflict great pain that would make a great bear sick for days on end, just as Porky should have remembered from last early-fall when he poked his inquisitive young nose too close to a buzzing and trembling coil as if about to casually ask what all the noise was about.

Fat rattlers properly killed and the dangerous head knocked off were sometimes equal to the smack of warm young colt meat or a filly. It was also as filling as mountain sheep, a wild goat, a lynx or a bobcat that sometimes failed to give trail, and was as juicy as the fat and saucy gophers with holes under the rocks high up on the warm southern slopes of Old Baldy, the great mountain ball with a white pate of snow looming above the timberline two miles north of the wall of cliffs.

Then there were the fat, black beetles under the old logs and windfalls down the valley and on the slopes, the logs sometimes weighing several tons, of course, but no great object to a grizzly's enormous strength when it came to rolling them over and helping herself to the scurrying find underneath.

In addition, there were all kinds of berries in the bushes along the river, and the

same when it came to tender roots and herbs simply for the finding and taking. The river also gave up frogs and water snakes, and it gave up fish, the latter to be spat out high and dry out on the banks after long and patient waiting on the edges of the shallows and the foot-deep holes—all this while Porky, the beloved son, sat on his rump on the bank, the Big-I-Am-It and outright cheat who had never actually earned his first fin or tail, youth being youth and strictly on the take, this mountain world of the Rockies with white peaks and green slopes and dashing streams all around looked upon as entirely his own oyster, providing some one else did the work, right down to the cracking and opening of the shells.

Porky wanted honey this morning. He had wanted the same thing yesterday, along with just any other little tid-bit that struck his fancy. It had been the same for days, for the most of his life, as long as he had known how to whimper and whine for things—and go into an unlordly sulk when they were not immediately forthcoming. There was a place—a very dangerous place—down the ledges and high above the river where he knew his mother could find it.

Up there in the rocks there were many places where swarms of bees had settled, finding their way through cracks to small holes in the face of the cliffs. After all, there was a wider ledge sixty or seventy feet below the spot, a good place to sit and wait for the sweet chunks to drop one after the other, Mamook up there doing all the fighting and bear-cussin' as the swarming clouds of little black devils kept up a relentless attack on the great bear while she tore open the rocks and clawed out the precious stores, getting herself stung from nose to rump, sometimes so repeatedly she growled each time she tried to sit for days, and now and then she had to wander about half-blind, both eyes swollen almost closed.

Porky had never seen the old bear turn tail and flee from any other thing that walked, crawled or flew. No other thing except a skunk. There was something about a skunk. Something tremendously powerful about that little black and white-striped animal of the cat family that was apt to be encountered in the most unexpected places.

The skunk rarely gave ground for anything. If a bear met one on a ledge wide enough for a dozen bears to travel shoulder to shoulder, the skunk kept serenely to the middle of it. All else gave ground, got out of the way without an argument.

It was all a very great mystery, that skunk business. Porky had never solved it. He had seen his mother roll over a huge log where hundreds of nice, fat and shiny-black beetles were hiding below. He had seen an old skunk and four kittens appear as if from nowhere, and had watched his mother back away, crying her woes to the sky but refusing to fight a stroke about it.

All the mystery of the skunk had something to do with the tail. Porky had come close to finding out about it no less than six times in his young life. Almost any other bear would have given it up as a most hopeless business after the first or second try. His curiosity had been his undoing. All skunk tails were interesting, such pretty little tails, black and white-striped like the rest of the skunks he had seen. Most amazing tails, until a cub poked his nose too close to investigate. It was then, without any quarreling or bristling about it, that the very mountains shook, breath ceased to be breath, the air turning gold—all hell in the face, the nose and hair, and all the water in that madly rushing and spouting river below not half enough to wash the smell away!

But no image of skunks were making mental pictures in that thick grizzly brain under the thick and sloping grizzly skull this morning. It was something else. The air seemed heavy. As he came roly-poly

and wattling out of the den a faint, sweet smell had come to him on an equally faint stir of breeze coming up the ledges from down the river.

Honey! At times, the wind being right, the entire face of the great cliffs seemed hauntingly filled with the sweet essence of it—that delightful, never-forgettable sticky stuff came in chunks while hair and bees flew above, the old bear fighting as if for her life, slapping with one paw at a time, pawing with the other, and wailing her ears off as if there was something about it to get mad over!

Honey! Nothing in the mountains like honey! On his feet again, much too fine to be slapped around, he started down the ledge, the farspoiled grizzly brat about to go it alone, abused, hurt to the bone and never-going-to-get-over-it. As usual, he kept one eye cocked back over his shoulder just to see what the mighty Mamook was going to do about it, and mainly, how far she would let him get before calling him back or coming to overtake him, bringing an apology in the shape of a few loving licks of her long, warm tongue to the face and other parts to let youth know that he was still the master of the earth.

RESTING behind the old windfall a mile down the valley with a 40-power telescope and a high-powered rifle, Ichabod Smith, the head-hunter, saw them coming. The telescope showed the big cub still a few yards in the lead, his back humped, his walk hoggish, the general expression of the whole picture one of a sorely rumped disposition.

The old bear walked as if she had all day about it, stopping now and then to scratch as if turning over a flea. Ichabod Smith's flat-gray eyes lose their flatness and became leering and greenish when he finished studying her through the telescope. A smile twisted its way across his long, lean face, all the way back to the big ears that seemed to stand straight outward

from the sides of his head like ill-fitting blinds on the bridle of some old and broken-down buggy-mare.

A gangling man with a gangling neck, arms and legs, he was close to fifty now. For more than twenty years he had been prowling the high and low places, hunting everything worth hunting. Men knew of him from Canada to Lower California and Mexico. Others knew him as far east as Chicago, New York and Boston, the tales of his hunting expeditions constantly spreading wherever big-game hunters gathered to share each other's yarns.

Ichabod Smith was a man who never failed to produce the game, often in places where long-seasoned hunters, guides and pack-train leaders said they were as bare of the big stuff as the palm of a hand. His camp was behind him now, two miles down the valley beyond the big red horse waiting patiently in the brush a few rods below the windfall. Half of the six dudes he was guiding were still in their blankets, he guessed, the smell of frying bacon, flap-jacks and coffee making them cock one eye at a time while they stretched and yawned.

Dr. Inmann Shonto of Boston, had come back for a spring try at the great bears known to range the Gunsight Pass country. Led by another hunter and guide of the Rockies called Buck Shell, he had had a try in these parts only last fall. Shell had failed to stir up anything much more than an old black bear with a sad case of the mange that had robbed it of the most of its hair. Along with the bear there had been a couple of bob-cats, one big lynx and a single, half-grown cougar shot one night off a ledge in the moonlight.

Fall, of course, was the proper time for a general hunt, but—because they were rated as a menace to man and livestock alike—there were no restrictions on shooting grizzly; and far up here in the high places a careful hunting party might shoot a few other things, a buck, for instance, as meat for the camp and wild fowl along

the river, with the fish for the taking.

Spring meant the entire hunting grounds for the party willing to take advantage of it. Fall meant everybody and his dog coming, bullets flying from all direction, high-powered rifles in the hands of city fools who had never fired a gun before beyond a shooting gallery where there was a steel wall to stop little dabs of .22 lead. Dr. Inmann Shonto, little, dark and wax-mustached, sometimes called a Jap, knew all about it. Last fall he had felt the sting of a bullet through a rear cheek and another through the calf of the right leg when some jackass nearly three-quarters of a mile away had mistaken him for a deer!

Ichabod Smith was here to make good, something he could always do in one way or another. Wild animal heads, and great bearskin and cougar rugs to go on the highly polished floors of clubs and dens were a specialty and right in his line. He had furnished many a Moose Club with a moose head, the Elks with an elk, or, rather, wapiti, the nearest thing the North American continent could come to it. Backed by a certain trick photographer in Missoula, even the most timid soul could go back east with a picture of himself in hunting togs, a high-powered rifle on his arm and his foot on the neck of a grizzly, an elk, a snarling mountain lion or a lordly moose.

Half-holding his breath, he waited, watching for a few minutes longer, and then he was rapidly moving back. Something told him that he had met that old she-bear up there before and she had escaped him. Without Inmann Shonto behind him he would have immediately started manouvering for another try at the bear again this morning to bring both her and the cub down.

But Inmann Shonto was a spender. Money meant nothing to him, not when it was reported that he sometimes charged men a thousand dollars for merely looking

them over, in the eye, the nose or the throat; and after all, Dr. Shonto was paying for this. He had come all the way to Montana again to shoot a grizzly *himself*.

This would be Dr. Inmann Shonto's morning of mornings!

* * *

Porky was the object of the first bullet, for the simple reason that his mother was above him and would have to come down the face of the cliffs before she could turn and flee. He ignored the wail in the air and the furious slap as the bullet struck the rocks only a foot above his head, the long, clear report of the rifle trailing from down there across the river in the edge of a low forest of pines.

Chunks of honey had just started to fall. Mamook the Mighty was up there on the face of the cliffs, having no more than a yard-wide lip of rock to stand on. Some of her wails sounded almost like the wail of the bullet. She had clawed off a two-foot slab of rock, letting loose a swarming cloud of black fury that was like a buzzing, stinging cyclone around her head, her ears and nose catching fits while she pawed and slapped, first with one paw, then the other, great tears already pouring down the broad and snarling bear-face.

This was hot business, not the kind to long tempt any other animal with shorter hair and a less-tough old bear hide. Porky had engineered it, not with any great smartness in his thick grizzly brain but merely by the sweet smell in the air and an urge of the palate and belly to have something done about it. Being ahead of his mother, he had gone straight to the place where there was a break in the rocks that would allow her to reach the short ledge above. At once he had started up, at least going to make a bluff of it, and Mamook, the ever-watchful, ever-conscious of the slightest danger ahead for this young upstart, had hauled him back.

Not going to be whipsawed out of everything, son or no son, she swept her own mouth full of honey now and then, smashing it down with its covering of bees and relishing them as well as the rest of it. Without the bees, without all the terrible stinging and buzzing, it would have been a great dish for the oldest of bears. But even a grizzly had to stop and paw them off when the little black devils covered her nose and were pouring it full of fire to the bone.

The sound of the rifle in the distance stopped everything. The old bear-ears knew that sound. Bees or no bees, she tensed for a moment, then turned, fanning industriously at a big lump of little-winged damnation piling up on her great, waddling stern.

Another high-powered report from the edge of the low cloud of timber below settled it. This time it brought a wail from Porky, and Mamook moved like a startled hog, scurrying along the ledge for the break in the rocks that would take her down to the broader ledge.

Porky was not doing much about it when she got there. He was still trying to wolf down honey with his right paw while he waved the left forearm up and down, slinging blood on the rocks underfoot. Mamook let him have that certain, startled growl that was meant to tell him to get out of here. He reached for another chunk of honey, and it was then that the old bear delivered her first blow astern, one that lifted him in the air and pitched him forward on his nose.

Danger! The second growl shook with it, but there was little need of it now. Another bullet had come shrieking up from the timber as the rifleman down there completed a shift for position. Porky felt another smacking sting, this time on the left side of his thick skull. But this time even a young fool knew enough to run.

Mamook was soon leading the way. In-

stinctively, or by any other name it might have been called, she hugged the inner side of the ledge, leaving the outer lip to afford what protection it could until they were around a sharp bend where there was a deep, trough-like break in the rocks leading upward to a wider ledge high in the face of the cliffs. It was not until she reached the second ledge, a bullet having come only here and there, that she stopped to look at Porky's wounds.

The ragged bloody rake on the side of the cub's head would have knocked a horse down or left a man unconscious for a week. Such a wound was only a scratch to a grizzly. Not yet aroused to any great shakes of temper, those roaring, charging fits that would make a grizzly wade and wallow through a field of fire to get to a would-be killer, Mamook licked the head wound clean, then gave a few swipes of her tongue to the neat, round hole that had gone through the flesh of his right forepaw. As she licked her growls tried to tell him a thing or two.

This was a very bad morning for the high country. There was a hunter, maybe many hunters, walking in the land. This was just the beginning of things—very bad things! Man-things were not the kind to make only one try or two for a kill. Man-things followed up, and there would be traveling ahead, no more of the cliffs here for a few days, maybe many days. This was the time to get out, to hunt higher cover and keep hidden from sight.

Porky was not very interested. Now that he knew he was hurt he wanted to sit back on his rump and wail his woes high-heaven about it. Mamook knew all, saw everything, and knew how to take care of everything. He had been with her last fall when the hunters came. She had taken care of the situation then; she could do it now. Perhaps it even flickered through his thick grizzly brain that it was her business to go down there and settle matters now while he took a little rest to ease his aching

head—and could possible slip back and finish the rest of honey that had been left behind.

Porky settled himself firmly on his rump. Mamook still fanned her own now and then and rubbed her tender nose, already swollen into almost a round ball, the memory of bees never easily forgotten. She tried to urge the cub on. When he started to cry out of one side of his mouth and bear-yowl about it from the other she promptly raked him to his feet and smacked him another blow to the rump that would have cracked a plank on the side of a house, and started paw-booting him along in front of her, still heading for higher ground.

“ONE SHOT was close, maybe a scratch. The others missed complete, I’d swear. Range ain’t over six hundred yards.”

Inmann Shonto winced, staring at the place where the bears had gone out of sight. He fired a quick, dark glance to his right, one that took in the long, lean figure from head to ragged heel who stood hunched there against the bole of a tree. Ichabod Smith had just lowered his battered old telescope. To ignore him Shonto lowered his own rifle and quickly swept up his high-powered binoculars for another look at the cliffs.

“Maybe, now,” Smith was going on in that thoroughly calm and collected tone that would never be heard inside a psychopathic ward, “it all has somethin’ to do with that new gun.”

“There’s not a confounded thing wrong with my rifle!” snapped the doctor. “Maybe it’s the light. Or—or,” he added, quickly, “these new bifocals of mine!”

“Could be.” Smith craned his long neck to one side and let a streak of tobacco juice drop like a noiseless yellow arrow into the thick pine needles underfoot. “I’d still say it was the gun. You’re one of them expert eye an’ neck doctors. Seems to me you’d

be a shade too damn smart to get yourself messed up on a plain pair of specs.

“Guns, now, are like horses.” He seemed to stretch himself straight beside the tree. “They’re plum chuck-full of character, each one a little different no matter who’n hell made ’em. You’ve got to learn ’em all by heart. For instance now, a high-power like that won’t shoot the same in the cool of the mornin’ as it will in the warm of the afternoon.

“That’s any high-power.” He shook back his shoulders. “That’s to be said about almost any gun, short or long. Take the high-power. In a pinch an’ shootin’ fast—Well, Doc, you can allus know your sixth shot’s gonna climb sky. Yonder more’n the first, even the fifth. That means lower your elevation, an’ you lower fast, ’specially if it’s a grizzly comin’ your way on the run. Take this old Four-O-Five grizzly gun of mine. She . . .”

“Mr. *Smith*,” angrily cut in the doctor, “the bear up there are getting away. Instead of trying to stand and lecture me on velocity—”

“Yeah, I know, Doc!” Smith picked up his rifle from beside the tree. “We’ll get back to the horses. But don’t worry about them bears. There’s my thirteen bear dogs back at camp, the best that ever hit a trail. We’ll get ’em an’ ’cross the river down yonder where them two big windfalls make a bridge across that deep cut in the banks. Them dogs’ll pick up the trail an’ bring them bears outa any old hole they may try to hide in.

“Why, hell, Doc,” he grinned all the way back to those large, outstanding ears, “you’re gonna get yourself a grizzly today if I have to rope the damn thing an’ tie it to a tree for your shot, just like I once had to do for a big banker squirt from the East Side, somewhere in New York City. . .”

The sun was high in the sky and reaching well toward the zenith of the heavens before Mamook heard the baying rising

and falling behind them. Working their way upward in the rocks, a grizzly never a very good climber at best, they had left the cliffs entirely. Mamook seemed to be heading for the high dome of Old Baldy, but there was never anything exactly certain when it came to a grizzly bear. At any moment she could turn to head east or west for the rougher country.

Breakfast was still a matter of importance, great importance to the ever-hungry Porky. Mamook had taken a look-about when they came up past the old rattler dens on top of the cliffs, but it had been too early and the rocks too cool for the snakes to be out for their hour or two of morning sun before again vanishing to escape the heat. Rattlesnakes liked it neither too hot nor too cool, and there had been no chance for breakfast back there, Porky doing a little whimpering about it.

There were gophers ahead now in a broad glade. All a mother bear had to do was to turn over six or seven tons of big flat stones and spat the little, earthen-brown rodents down as they fled from their uncovered burrows, and breakfast would be there for the taking, dessert in the shape of a couple of gallons of honey having already come first back there before the bullets spoiled everything.

And now the infernal dogs. Somewhere in the back of Porky's brain flicked a picture of the snarling and barking brutes in the past, but there were gophers here—and why not stop and have a few!

Mamook had other and far stronger ideas. Dogs meant trouble, out-right war unless she could put them behind. Up on the bare slopes of Old Baldy there were many deep, dark holes where a bear and her cub could go underground and hide. She had had to take advantage of them in the past, and she was going back to them now if they could only keep far enough ahead of the dogs.

But the dogs were not to be put off or sidetracked. There were six or seven

hounds in the lot, keen-nosed brutes that could follow any trail, in darkness or daylight, over mountain and ridge or up and down the deepest canyon any bear could find. Hounds were not to be shaken unless a bear came to a place where they could not climb and follow.

The rest of the pack was a big, scrawny breed, a little of everything rolled into things that looked like dogs except for one little black and tan feist bitch, the latter with a sharp, hellishly annoying bark and due to be the source of a great deal of trouble.

Even Porky forgot his immediate belly-urge when the noise of the chase started closing in around his ears, Mamook now hog-jumping at his heels and spitting regularly, driving him toward a low wall of cliffs against the rapidly rising slopes of the mountain dome ahead with its far-shining crown of eternal snow.

It was the old, old grizzly stand Mamook came to. Cub quivering and whimpering in a crevice behind her, she wheeled with her back to the low cliffs, the great, defensive mother now on her hind feet, the full nine feet of her, forepaws swinging as mighty clubs warming up for action, murder ablaze in the little-pig eyes as the howling, baying and drumming cloud of dogs broke cover and came pouring out of a low wall of brush sixty yards away.

In spite of Ichabod Smith's boast, some of the dogs were newcomers into this most deadly dangerous business of bringing a bear to bay and holding her until men with their high-powered rifles could come up and finish her off with bullets from a safe distance.

The feist came up and seemed to be trying to show the new dogs how it was to be done. A wise little bitch, she jerked to a stop a full twenty feet away, then started running back and forth, first to one side and then other, barking keen and penetrating, moving as if drawing a big half-circle to mark the danger line.

Two big, rusty half-bull, half-airdales were the first of the brutes to get the living hell knocked out of them. Bulldogs had no sense, and it was probably the bull in them that made them risk the charge, coming in almost shoulder to shoulder after a minute of sparring and bluffing, having ignored the feist to dart ahead of her.

Mamook saw it coming and ceased her snarling, growling and forepaw-swinging. If this was It, then let It be! Murder faded from those little-pig eyes. Into them came tiny, dancy gleams, teasingly inviting, for the moment as innocent as babes in cradles.

It was murder, cold-blooded, absolutely premeditated. With the feist seemingly trying to scream danger, the two bristling dogs made their rush. They were suddenly shooting upward as rusty thunderbolts, leaping for the throat, eyes probably on the great, limp forearms at the feindishly quiet old bear's sides.

When the flying rusty bolts were close enough Mamook stirred. It was like sheer, raw hell letting the lightning flash from the very bottom of her fighting grizzly soul.

Slush! Slop!

In a flash it was done. The two dogs were like things exploding, blowing apart in mid-air. They were dogs at one instant, flying blood and guts at the next, two terrible paw-strokes having been delivered as one, each strong enough to break the back of the strongest horse, the bodies of her victims sitting ground yards away, each dog dead as he flew as a splattering, dripping thing through the air. . .

"I SAY, my man, it looks as if your bully bear dogs have made a bit of a mess of it and let us down."

It was Dr. Inmann Shonto's golden opportunity to get even with Ichabod Smith for shooting his lip off about the new rifle. They had just come up to the place where the old bear had been brought to a

stand. Only six of the dogs remained on their feet and were still barking and howling their woes there at the base of the rocks. Blood, hide and hair had been spat and splattered in a wide half-circle, dead and near-dead dogs rimming it to mark the battleground.

"I don't see my Fanny." Hating the very devil out of the strutting, all-important, know-it-all Shonto by this time, Ichabod Smith was looking around for the little feist. "She was smarter'n the rest."

"Didn't have to be very smart for that, Mr. Smith." Shonto lifted his wax-haired upper lip. "Maybe the bear just swallowed her."

"Not my Fanny." Smith shook his head, holding his temper, aware of the grinning of the five other dudes of the doctor's party behind him. "Fanny was too smart. She'd never get close enough to get caught by any bear. Lis'en!" His head had come up with a jerk, green-gray eyes suddenly as bright as a gander's as they scanned the high rocks beyond the low cliffs, Old Baldy's white head looming against a pastel blue sky above it all. "That's Fanny! Hear 'er? Beats any dog I ever saw at climbin' an' trailin'. Nary a hound can beat her when it comes to nose. She's little an' gets up where other dogs can't, an' she's followed that damn bear an' the cub. Lis'en to that baby sing!"

There was no doubt about it now. Fanny was up there, that little insignificant pooch trying to tell everybody below that she was still on the job and still had the old bear and cub in sight. For a second Dr. Shonto felt like apologizing. A second thought told him that it was beneath his dignity.

"I'm going up, gentlemen!" He swung off his horse, new rifle in his hand, a great, broad belt of cartridges around him. "That's my bear and my cub!"

"It's risky, Doc." Smith swung down. "Them shelves up there are like the brims

of hats dropped one atop of the other, an' a grizzly ain't like no other bear in the world. When they start to charge you've got to shoot damn fast an' damn straight, otherwise you're gonna die."

"Rather exciting, I'm sure." Shonto lifted that wax-haired lip again. "I was told the same thing in India when it came to tigers."

"A tiger ain't a grizzly." There was something like awe in the long, lean man's eyes and tone. "Given a face to face start, no tricks, an' I'll bet my money any day that just an ordinary grown grizzly would kill any damn tiger that ever walked. Hell, tigers run an' jump. An old grizzly just stands an' bangs away with both paws. What he or she hits just naturally goes down, an' stays there."

But Dr. Inmann Shonto was going up, not to be denied his chance, not after getting this close and one lone little dog so evidently holding the big old bear and her cub at bay a few hundred feet above him. His rifle was the best the greatest gunsmiths of London could produce, its bullets large and heavy enough to down a full-grown African bull-elephant. When it came to his cool shooting ability he had once dropped a madly charging tiger at sixty paces, with a single shot, and right when men around him had completely lost their heads and were only blasting the sickly, sticky-hot air of an India jungle full of holes.

Annoyed by the sharp yapping of the feist on a ledge a full twenty feet below her, Mamook winced and shot back on her rump when the rifle suddenly crashed ahead of her, the bullet hard-raking under the left shoulder-pit. Surprise held her for the next second. She was shooting herself forward in the next, hell on the move now and instant murder shining in the wicked little pig-eyes. A terrified wail from Porky just behind her spoiled it when the second shot crashed. She wheeled half back to him, and saw that he had

wheeled himself and was going in the opposite direction, frightened out of his wits by the shots and a quick splattering of rock that had struck him along the side of the face.

Swinging back, she started again for the crouching, two-legged thing there on the lip of the ledge, a man working madly with the rifle now as if everything had gone wrong with it right at the last moment. She headed straight on for him in her rolling, hog-jumping run. The man yelled something, a sound that was like a terrified woman's sudden screaming, then he was up and turning to run, dropping the rifle as he fled along the ledge, looking for the place to get to the one below.

An upturned stone saved Dr. Inmann Shonto's life. His toe struck it and he went down, flat on his face on the ledge, consciousness completely knocked out of him for the moment. When he opened his eyes he held his breath for just a second, and then promptly fainted. The great old bear and the cub were having a close-hand look at him.

Mamook, wound forgotten for the moment, was turning the two-legged thing over and over, first on his back, then on his belly, and taking a good smell of him up and down. Porky had discovered something nice and sweet about him, and had found that it came from the hair that grew on his head. He took a lick at it, then wiped his tongue on the side of his leg, hair oil having a much better smell than taste.

It was not given to a bear to understand this thing. Mamook might have crushed his skull with a single stroke if he had tried to sit up and yell again. The dead faint was saving him. When he cracked open his eyes the cub was already going away, hugging the inner side of the ledge. The old bear had turned to lick her shoulder, and it was Inmann Shonto's chance. Like a fish out of water he was suddenly wheel-

(Continued on page 129)

THE RIVER RENEGADES

By Jeb Ford



Aboard the Black Raider, the boss of river pirates carried on his private war with the richly-laden packets!

RIVER PIRATES were common along the wild upper reaches of the Missouri and in the broad, lake-like tail of the Mississippi right up to close of the first half of the 19th century. A few even lingered after that, despite military expeditions and, what was more discouraging, the sharp drop in the shipping of valuables by water that occurred with the advent of the railroads.

How they gained the romantic title of pirate is a mystery, for all but one of these marauders were landbubbers at heart, darting out from shore in rowboats but having their headquarters on land. One waterway robber and his gang of cut-throats, however, really had the appearance of genuine, high-seas pirates. They had a wood-burning side-wheeler, painted coal black and named the Black Raider, from which flew the universal ensign of the skull and crossbones. The crew carried long, curved knives and often wore bright handkerchiefs bound around their heads. The only connection they bore to the frontier was the shiny sixguns at their sides. One suspects that someone among them must have read a book, for they practiced such traditional pirate tactics as kidnapping ladies, making captured passengers walk the plank, and boarding enemy vessels on swinging ropes.

The identity of the leader has never been positively revealed but he is generally agreed to have been Matthew Parks, of

Westville, Montana who took to the yellow waves of the Father of Waters only after failing signally as a land-based highwayman during the very hectic years 1839-1842.

By 1847, Parks, if such he was, had become a major issue with the steamboat companies. His daring knew no limits. A vessel was sent upriver from St. Louis to do battle with him. It carried three light cannon and two full companies of infantry, as well as three officers of one ship line who had come along as observers. Just above the site of Cairo, Illinois, the government boat was captured. The well-informed pirates offered no harm to the crew or the members of the U. S. Army aboard, but sought out the locked and unnumbered cabins of the cowering officials, dragged these gentlemen forth, and cast them upon the waters like so much stale bread. That they managed to make shore was not the pirates' fault.

No one knows very much more about them. They were never defeated. The boat was never sunk, nor even sighted at a mooring. No pirates were ever captured alive or persuaded to talk. Why they suddenly ceased operations remain a mystery. About 1857, a river captain crossed his fingers and remarked that no one had seen the Black Raider that spring. He was right. The pirate boat failed to appear and no trace of it has ever been found since.

GUN-MASTER OF THE COMSTOCK LODGE

By Ray Townsend



The redhead had the drop on him, and Curt cursed himself for a fool.

Watching Kinhead's finger tighten on the trigger, Curt Graber, trouble-shooter for the Bear State Bank, knew that the man's plan was no madman's dream, and the billions from the Comstock Lode would help to split the United States forever asunder.

CURT GRABER strode across the hotel room, throwing open the tall windows, drawing the cold, San Francisco air deep into his lungs. He leaned far out, a lean, hard jawed man, bathing in the coolness, and forgot the sweating lowlands of the San Joaquin and the last stinking job he'd done for the

Bear State Bank, ruler of the territory.

"But, Curt boy, you got to put him off!" In the room behind, he heard Billy Robbins' whining voice. "It's my big strike, boy! I talked to Mason down at the bank and he says they'll pay me the twenty thousand soon's the bank takes possession. Ain't nobody on the Coast could get Kinkead off that land but you, Curt!"

He turned from the window, eyes dark on the oldtimer's anxious face. "I'm through, Billy," he said coldly. "I've done my last job for the bank. Now why don't you get smart and beat it!"

The grey haired little man stood his ground like a doubtful pup. "Was the time, boy, when. . . ."

Irritation grated in Curt's mind. "Trade on it, you broken down old fossil! So you staked me once when I was down! Do I have to jump every time you sneeze?" He turned back to the window, feeling the run of temper and yet unable to hold it down.

Billy Robbins waited, watching the younger man, studying the straight line of his back, the expensive clothes he wore, the set of anger along the hard line of his jaw. "You've changed, boy, these last five years," he said finally.

Five years! Curt snorted. Five years of fighting the bank's fight, of beating men who couldn't win. Yes, Curt guessed he'd changed. But it had been worth it. Twenty-five thousand acres on the upper Sacramento! Lush, rich bottomlands and the far-run reaches beyond: a Kingdom for a potato starved tatterdemalion from County Cork who'd crawled out of a square-rigger's belly for his first hungry look at the land they'd said was free! It hadn't been free, but five years as the bank's man had made it his. And now he was through! Done! Finished!

He swung again to face the little miner, seeing the puppy-dog look in watery blue eyes. And the memory was there, suddenly, of the Barbary Coast and a hungry

Irish mick and a man named Robbins who'd had a little luck he'd thought he should share.

"All right, Billy," he said finally. "All right."

THREE DAYS later Curt Graber stepped down from the stage at Virginia City and jerked his head in the direction of a low walled fort that dominated the town from a ridge to the south. "That Kinkead's fort?" he asked.

Billy Robbins stuck his head out the door of the Concord, nodding. "That's it," he said. "And she's sittin' smack dab on the claim I sold the bank!"

Curt strode along the street's quiet length, feeling the waiting life of the town through grey-dawn mists. The urgency was in him to get this over with, to serve his notice on this man in his toy fort and leave the bleak, high ramparts of Sun Mountain. The rolling, fertile acres of the ranch on the Sacramento were in his thoughts, and a slow gnawing resentment that Billy Robbins had claimed his debt.

The parade ground of the fort was a postage stamp of uneven earth, the tumbled stone walls looking out over the town's broad bench on the high eastern shoulder of Sun Mountain. But as the lightening pallor grew from beyond the town, the fort walls stood out more sharply and the booming report of the reveille gun made its sharp declamation of command.

As Major Atwill Kinkead turned from the company of men at the parade's far end, Curt Graber saw the preciseness of the man. Curt frowned as he studied the intelligence in the wide sweep of brow, the purpose that lighted his glance and the determination that lay in the square set of his jaw. Here was someone to reckon with. He waited at a near corner of the stone building, and as the major came up he spoke swiftly, without waste of words, keeping his eyes hard upon the angled planes of the older man's face.

"Mister!" Kinkead's answer came after a minute's silence, his voice like the clipped, sharp efficiency of a mounted Gatling. "I don't know you from Adam, but you're either drunk or you're crazy—or both! And if you're not off this fort in two minutes. . ."

"Listen, Kinkead!" And suddenly it was just another job to Curt Graber. "If you want to play soldier, that's your business! But this is bank land and we're starting development as soon as the equipment gets up the hill! I'll give you twenty-four hours to get your toy gun off the Robbins claim! The surveyors will be out tomorrow morning! Don't be in their way!"

He turned as the man made answer, leaving the words to the emptiness of high mountain air. It was a job, that was all. Talk never helped. He retraced his steps along the flank of the ridge, dropping back to the wakening town on its shelf above the sweeping land beyond.

Curt had studied Kinkead's setup here on the mountain before he'd left for Virginia City two days earlier. As he sat down to breakfast with Billy Robbins in the dining room of the hotel, he was remembering that the fort had been thrown up to protect Virginia City from the Piutes the year before. When the Indian threat had died down, the eighty rifles, which had been borrowed from the California state militia, had been neglected in the old armory. There had been no authority on the matter, and when Kinkead had started unofficially training volunteers in a one-officered, independent militia, no one had seen fit to object.

"Ben! Ben Ferguson!"

* * *

Billy Robbins suddenly exploded from his chair, and as Curt glanced up he met the surly, dissatisfied look of an elderly, black bearded miner whom the excited

little man introduced as the "gol-dinged-est dry-gully partner a man ever had!" The second man was about Curt's age, stocky and belligerent, though Curt read a weakness in the soft line of his chin that didn't tally with the angry red color of his hair. His name was Allan Shafer and he owned the final third of the original Danger Belle claim, his father had been a partner with Robbins and Ferguson. The thought crossed Curt's mind that both men knew who he was and that neither was losing any love over the matter.

"Never thought you'd sell to no widow-robbin' bank, Billy!" Ferguson's gaze sparked. "When you and me and old Zeb located Gold Canyon together I never thought I'd see the day when you'd turncoat on us!"

"Turncoat?" echoed Billy. "Why, you damned old horny toad, you and Shafer got just as much right to sell your claims as I have mine! When Curt moves Kinkead off the ridge you'll sing a different tune I'll bet! Why, with that Johnny-reb sittin' on our claims we couldn't get nothing done one way or t'other!"

"I'd die afore I'd have anything to do with the Bear State Bank, Billy Robbins!"

"What makes you think your friend here can move Kinkead off the ridge, Billy?"

Curt met Allan Shafer's cool gaze and he felt the taunt of the man. He came to his feet then and said:

"Maybe we should straighten a few things out, gentlemen. The bank is taking possession of the north thirty feet of the Danger Belle claim in twenty-four hours. I've told Kinkead already. Whether Kinkead leaves the ridge or not is of no concern to the bank."

"You mean you ain't going to clear the whole Danger Belle claim, Curt boy?" Billy demanded. "You going to let that Johnny-reb keep his fort on Ferguson's and Shafer's land?"

"The bank's buying your claim, Billy, not the entire Danger Belle."

"You danged right you don't catch no penny stealin' outfit doin' nobody a turn!" Ferguson glared from beneath bushy brows. "But Kinkead ain't off your land yet, Billy Robbins!"

"Damned if you don't talk like one of them Johnny-rebs yourself, you old she-bear! Next thing you know you'll be coming out for Jeff Davis and *seeseshun*! You gone and turned Georgia on us, Ben?"

"Why, you little—" The taller man broke into a fit of profanity, towering over little Billy Robbins as though he would obliterate him through sheer size. "I'm a better Lincoln man than you'll ever be, Billy Robbins! But, by God, I don't have to sell out to no bank that bleeds orphans and poor folk to prove it!"

"Dad!"

CURT'S glance narrowed as he studied the young women who crossed into the living room behind Ben Ferguson and Allan Shafer. He'd had a glimpse of her in the lobby beyond, and he saw now that he'd not misjudged the attractiveness of her slender figure and evenly molded features.

"Dad, they can hear your voice from here to Carson!" Her glance hesitated on Curt. "If you and Billy must fight, you might at least wait until you're outside!"

The girl had her father's arm, but as the old man's attention seemed glued angrily upon Billy Robbins, her glance went to Allan Shafer. The man colored beneath her gaze, but as she turned to Curt he introduced himself in a short, tight voice.

He met her glance, feeling the directness of her, and realizing then something of the reasons behind Allan Shafer's grudging ill temper. She was a free-riding, high-handed wench, he saw, and one who would use plenty of spur if a

man gave her the slightest provocation.

They were alone and seated at the table and talking then, as though it had all been prearranged. He felt a turn of admiration for her and at the same time was aware, somehow, of the deep calculation behind her steady grey-blue eyes.

He waited a moment for the lightness of her voice to pause, then put his words in carefully, studying her expression as he spoke. "What do you want from me, Miss Ferguson?"

Her glance dropped, coming back quickly. "You're rather abrupt, Mr. Graber."

Curt waited.

"It's no secret, why you're here, Mr. Graber. Everyone in Virginia City knows that since Billy sold his share of the Danger Belle, Kinkead's fort is standing on bank land."

Curt nodded.

"You don't honestly think that you can put Major Kinkead off that land, do you, Mr. Graber?"

Curt smiled. "That's the general idea. And what's so important around the fort to keep me from getting him off?"

The girl paused, regarding him a moment in silence, a smile on her face as though the sight of him amused her. In that one brief moment Curt found himself admiring the cold competent look of her.

"What do you know about Major Kinkead, Mr. Graber?" she asked suddenly.

He told her what he'd learned at the home office, what Billy Robbins had told him, and of his brief meeting with the man earlier that morning.

"You don't give the Major much credit, Mr. Graber."

"I meet all kinds of men in my work, Miss Ferguson," he said slowly. "It's not my job to give them credit."

"Perhaps you meet too many who are beaten; too many who have done their fighting before you came along?"

Curt felt blood rise in his face. "You talk hard," he said, "for a woman."

"Has any reason occurred to you why Major Kinkead is training a garrison?"

Watching the girl's rapt eagerness, it seemed to Curt that he could see her need to dominate as a solid thing there between them. It was as though she shook him and said "look, fool, it is I who know, I who speak, I who rule!" And it was because of this understanding that there was no anger in him and he held quiet while she continued.

"There's going to be a war, Curt Graber, a war, do you understand?" Her eyes sparkled as she talked. "Do you have any idea how much silver is taken out of the Comstock every month—every day? Millions! And do you have any idea what those millions might mean to the south, if they secede?"

Her reasoning hit him suddenly, staggeringly. But the idea was so. . . He laughed abruptly, a single, short laugh.

Color heightened in the girl's face. Her voice thickened. "Yes, millions, Curt Graber! And who do you think would be in charge of Sun Mountain, of the Comstock and the whole Territory if the south went out tomorrow?" She laughed. "Yes, and with only eighty men! But eighty men well disciplined and loyal to the right party! There's not a trooper in the Territory and nearly half the men on the mountain sympathize with the south! Sun Mountain belongs to Major Atwill Kinkead and the south Curt Graber! And so do I!"

The girl caught her breath, looking at him with eyes that gleamed fanatically. When she spoke again her voice was a harsh whisper across the table.

"Do you think for one minute that he'd let a man like you interfere?"

SHE WAS on her feet then, and gone without waiting. Standing, Curt watched the slenderness of her figure as

she crossed the room, feeling a letdown when she'd gone. The quiet after the storm.

"Mr. Graber."

Curt stepped back from the door seeing Allan Shafer in the dim light of the hall beyond, nodding briefly. Major Atwill Kinkead came into the room and as Shafer followed him in, Curt caught the redhead's flushed glance and said:

"Your politics seem to vary with the hour, Mr. Shafer."

"You're interested in politics, Mr. Graber?" The major's voice was a deep sound in the room.

"To me," Curt said, "nothing means less." He moved across the room, feeling Shafer's gaze on his back.

"Shafer tells me you had a long talk with Miss Ferguson this morning." Kinkead sat, stiffly.

"It'd be my guess that Shafer tells you lots of things, Kinkead."

"A-hm." Kinkead coughed. "Yes. A headstrong girl, Kathy. You're wondering why I've come."

"Listen, Kinkead." Curt leaned against the stiff back of the chair, striking fire to a long, black cheroot. "I'm here to do a job. It seems that somebody's got different ideas. I've not. You're on bank land, you've got until tomorrow to get off and that's all there is to it."

Allan Shafer's laugh came, heavy with contempt. Kinkead spoke.

"I have heard of you, Graber. A man in your position becomes known. Too damned well known."

"So I've been told." Curt remembered Kathy Ferguson's words.

"You're a man who works for money, Graber. And I could use a man like you. Five years as field representative and trouble shooter for the Bear State Bank would be ideal training for the job I have in mind." He paused. "I am not a man to quibble. What would you say to a retainer of one million dollars?"

Looking at the man, Curt was tempted to laugh in his face. But he met the level authority of Kinkead's glance and saw the unswerving purpose in each line of the man's face, he paused. Thought of the mines was there suddenly, and the almost unbelievable wealth of the Comstock—that sixty-foot solid width of silver ore traversing the mountain upon which they stood—and the knowledge that a million dollars was a grain of sand to the richness of Sun Mountain. . . .

He knew then that the man was not mad; that such a thing was possible. Given the breaks, Kinkead could hold the ransom of nations in the clutch of his fist! To a seceding Southern government this would mean guns, powder, food, independence and equality with other nations! The wealth of Sun Mountain and the Comstock Lode!

"I thought you'd see reason, Graber." The suggestion of a smile touched Kinkead's lips. "The day is near when the south will strike—and I'll be ready. I could have dispensed with you as Shafer wished, but banks have a peculiarity of being persistent, and our resources, I'm sorry to say, are yet on paper."

But suddenly the whole thing snapped into place and Curt saw Kinkead and Shafer and Kathy and himself and what he was doing in Virginia City. A million dollars! He laughed abruptly, and spoke, watching the frown cross the man's angled face.

"Tomorrow morning, Kinkead! My last warning!"

But there was more than a frown in Atwill Kinkead's expression. Curt saw the signal a second late, but came around as the gun swung up in Allan Shafer's hand, taking a quick stride that brought them together. He had the man's wrist in his grip when the gun exploded, feeling the closeness of the bullet. He shifted suddenly, smashing Shafer's jaw with his free fist, twisting against the gun sharply

when the reflex came. The pistol fell free, and Curt dropped and brought his right up in a blow that killed the fight in the red haired man. He swung, then, remembering Kinkead and knowing he was late. A blow took him alongside the temple and for a moment he fought up against the pain, but he went down in a soft and endless blackness.

WHEN CURT awoke, a million devils clamored in his skull, but the room was his own, and after washing dried blood from an inch long gash across his scalp, his thoughts left the immediate present, concentrating on Kinkead and his intentions. The man had left him, knowing he wasn't dead. For a moment, Curt thought he was letting his imagination run away with him; that the enormity of the man's ambitions was too impossible a thing. But the dry-necked little clerk at the desk downstairs quickly dispelled any doubt he had.

"It's not any of my business, Mr. Graber, but. . ." The clerk searched the empty lobby owlshly before leaning across the counter. "Mr. Robbins was making some terrible threats in the bar before the shooting, and. . ."

"What shooting?" Curt reached, getting a fistful of the man's lapels.

"Mr.—Mr. Robbins, sir! He left here swearing he was going to run the major off Sun Mountains. He was pretty drunk and. . ."

But it wasn't possible! When he'd last seen Billy. . . . And then, slowly, he realized that it was possible—very possible. He remembered Billy Robbins and the Barbary Coast and the mighty, boasting cockiness of the man that had so often got them both in hot water when the liquor flowed too freely.

"Well, Curt Graber." Turning, Curt saw that Kathy Ferguson had come into the lobby from the porch of the hotel. "We understand you're letting old men do your

work for you these days—and your fighting!”

Curt strode across, facing the girl demanding. “What’s happened? Where is he?”

The girl’s smile was contempt: a laugh of triumph. “I thought perhaps—”

“Where is he?”

“My arm, Mr. Graber!”

But Curt did not release the girl and as they stood together, she turned suddenly, jerking free of his grip, her eyes flaming in abrupt anger. “All right, you fool! He’s dead! He tried to gun whip Major Kinkead and the Major shot him!” Watching the expression of his face, she laughed abruptly.

“And in the absence of relatives and a will, his part of the claim reverts to my father and Allan Shafer, as partners! You didn’t think you could stop a man like the Major, did you, Curt Graber?”

For one brief moment Curt faced the girl, seeing the mockery in her eyes. “If you were a man, Kathy Ferguson,” he said quietly, “I’d break your neck!” He turned then, and left the room, hearing the brief, hard laughter of the girl as he went into the street.

IT WAS early afternoon when he reached the fort. Kinkead, surprisingly, was there on the parade ground, standing without expression while a man with sergeant’s chevrons sewed to his rough blue shirt turned a company of serious faced men through the precise paces of infantry drill. Dust came thinly from the uneven, rocky soil, and the sound of the drill was measured and military in spite of the lack of uniform. As Kinkead turned there was neither explanation nor compromise in the lean angularity of his face. He nodded briefly for Curt to follow, striding up the short slope to one of the small stone houses within the walls of the fort.

“Mr. Graber.” There was something

about the man’s cold formality that drew Curt’s respect in spite of his knowledge of Kinkead’s actual personal menace; that held Curt silent and waiting for his words. “Although we do not see eye to eye on many things, I want to tell you that I’m sorry about this Robbins affair. Owing to the fact that Shafer in some part had associated himself with me, I feel I owe some sort of explanation.”

“Listen, Kinkead—”

“And I advise you to do the listening.” The man let his length into a chair behind a small, cluttered table. “In the first place, I was never too happy about Shafer’s allying himself with me. He is too uncertain a man for my purposes. As you once said, he changes his politics a little too easily. But now, since this thing has happened, I wish to tell you outright that I want nothing more to do with the man and that I cannot find a place for him in my organization.”

“You mean Shafer shot Billy Robbins?”

Kinkead’s brows raised. “You hadn’t heard?” He nodded then, cutting Curt off with a gesture. “Also, Graber, I want you to come in with me under the terms we mentioned earlier. The south needs a man of your caliber badly, and to prove to you that I am sincere, I have made full arrangements to vacate the Robbins portion of this land immediately in spite of the fact that Robbins is dead and your claim no longer valid.”

Curt studied the man carefully, realizing that he was slowly but surely being stripped of his own purpose, and yet seeing nothing that he could do. Kinkead continued.

“It may be, Graber, that you do not approve of the intentions of my organization. However, I note, and I think you’ll agree with me, that there have probably been times when you did not agree with the intentions and purposes of the bank. And yet, because you were in their employ, you did not hesitate to follow your in-

structions implicitly. It is this type of loyalty that I want in my organization. The principles of the Confederacy are, like the purposes of the bank, a larger issue and one over which neither of us could possibly exert any control.

"There is going to be war, Graber, and I'm going to control Sun Mountain! I'm inviting you in on the winning side. The choice is up to you!"

"You're forgetting a thing or two, Kinkead." Curt leaned, gripping the table edge in the palms of his hands. "I came up here to take possession of a mining claim—and I'm not interested in politics—But if I were I'd surer than hell pick the north!"

Kinkead gestured. "The claim is yours."

A frown moved on Kinkead's face, he changed the subject to Robbins. "Ferguson and Shafer took Robbins' body. What you do about that is your affair. I've made you a proposition, man."

But it was too smooth, too pat. As he faced the man, Curt realized the power that lay in Kinkead's ability to rationalize. Listening to him, everything fell into its niche, all things were thus and so—and according to Major Atwill Kinkead's wishes. He frowned, demanding flatly:

"Ferguson stringing along with you?"

"Why—" The man paused for a fleeting second. "Yes. Ferguson's going along."

But Curt was remembering, suddenly, the blazing anger of the black bearded miner when Billy Robbins had only jokingly suggested that his sympathies had turned in favor of the south. A man's opinion on these things didn't change overnight—especially an older man as set in his ways as Ben Ferguson.

"What do you say we both go along to Ferguson's, Kinkead?" he asked quietly. "There's a couple of things I'd like straightened out."

The thin man came to his feet. "I've

given you all the information I have, Graber. I—"

"Ferguson's, Kinkead!" Curt's voice cut the man off. He nodded sharply, indicating the door, leaving no doubt as to the command intended.

Kinkead's glance hardened. "This is not a friendly way to open a partnership, Graber."

"Did you think of that when you bent that gun barrel over my head?" Curt smiled thinly.

Kinkead moved to the door slowly, swinging it open as he spoke. "I have heard that you are a deadly man with a gun, Graber, but you forget that I am in charge here." He raised his voice without warning. "Sergeant!" The man with the chevrons sewed to his sleeve was there, as though he'd been waiting just outside the door. Curt paused, meeting the man's gaze.

For the one moment it was in Curt to take Kinkead by force. The weight of his guns was there beneath his arms in shoulder holster; the slow move of anger prodding up inside. But what proof did he have? Proof of what, actually? The man's logic was too beautifully smooth.

"Sergeant, call the guard and escort Mr. Graber to the walls." Amusement lighted the glance of Kinkead's level eyes. "I have fifty well armed men here, Graber. I'll give you until morning to make up your mind on our deal. I'll be here when you come."

STRIDING back through the town, Curt cursed himself for listening to Kathy Ferguson and then going off half-cocked. Now he had no proof about anything! Hell, for all he knew there hadn't even been a shooting! And Shafer and Ferguson. . . .

He found the Ferguson house against the slope near the north edge of town. Half a dozen steps had been let into the cutbank siding the street, and as he lifted

to the porch of the house he searched the shuttered windows carefully before knocking. If Allan Shafer were inside and if he had shot Billy Robbins as Kinkead claimed, Curt knew that a good shot from ambush would be right up the man's alley. He stood tensely ready beside the door, and when it opened suddenly he was balanced and waiting.

"Draw them guns and I'll blow you apart!"

Ben Ferguson, tall and blackly threatening behind the twin barrels of a ten-gauge shotgun, glared at Curt as he stood inside the opened doorway. "Never reckoned that drawin' down on a bank man was much of a crime anyway, and if you ain't off that porch in one minute. . ."

"Mr. Ferguson, Major Kinkead told me I'd find you here." Curt kept his expression as openly innocent as he could. "He said that you and Billy Robbins had got into it and that you'd dragged down on Billy. Seeing's Robbins was a client of. . ."

"Said I dragged down on him!" The muzzle of the shotgun lowered a good six inches. "Why damn that ornery scullion's hide! He's supposed to—"

"Just thought I'd check on it, Mr. Ferguson." Curt saw he'd scored. "Guess you'll be riding down to the U. S. Marshal's office at Carson to tell him how it happened?"

"Eh? Marshal's office?"

"Guess you'll be pleading self-defense, Mr. Ferguson?"

"Self defense be damned! If that's what that low-down rebel skunk's figurin', I'm calling the whole thing quits right now!"

"You're calling nothing, Ben!" Curt turned, but Allan Shafer stood at the end of the porch, his pale eyes flat above the menace of a levelled 45. "Get back in the house, old man! You too, Graber! We'll see who's calling who on this deal!"

Curt frowned in anger at letting the red haired man get behind him, but he saw how things were going between the two

men. He'd banked on Ferguson's loyalties and knew now that he'd been right. There was a chance that if he played his hand right, things might fall out even better than he'd hoped. He moved into the room ahead of Shafer as the hollow muzzle of the gun prodded viciously into his spine.

But the old man had only backed a step or two out of Curt's way as he came into the room. He stood now, his eyes failing to understand as he watched Shafer enter, the shotgun drooping, forgotten, in his hands.

"But, Allan, Kinkead said. . ."

"Shut up, old man!" Shafer's voice sneered. "What's the difference what Kinkead said? I'm running things now and it'll be like I say!"

Curt stood in a corner of the room, his hands lifted head-high. He wanted to draw as little attention as possible, but he knew that this was his chance, that the old man's anger had to be played up. He spoke quickly, running his words in before Shafer could interrupt.

"They're framing you, Ferguson! Just like they did Billy Robbins! Don't let them get away with it!"

"You're asking for it, Graber!" Shafer took a step toward Curt, but brought up at the sharpness of Ben Ferguson's tone.

"Put that gun down, boy! I didn't like this from the start, pretending we'd shot Billy! But it's gone too far now and I'm putting a stop to it!"

In that moment, as Shafer's glance swung to Ferguson and the old man raised the shotgun before him, Curt knew he could have acted, that Shafer would have been easy meat for his guns. But this was the thing he had come for, this was what he needed: to set one man against the other, to find what it was that backed them all.

Suddenly there was the sound of hoofbeats outside, and the creak of harness; the lighter sounds of footsteps upon the

stairs and porch. The men inside the room held, in this instant, as though waiting for whoever it was that came: waiting—and judging.

But Curt had judged wrong. The sudden flaming report of a .45 filled the room and even as the door burst open, Ben Ferguson stared unbelievably across at Allan Shafer: stared and coughed once before he crumpled forward. He was dead, Curt knew, before he hit the floor.

"Dad! Oh, Dad!" Kathy Ferguson was there, rushing to her father's fallen form, kneeling to lift the lifeless head in her hands. Kinkead stood in the doorway, watching the girl.

"You were the one, Kathy!" Allan Shafer's voice came urgently. "You said no one could stop us! No one, you said! He was calling it quits! He said he was calling it quits!" The man's eyes were anxious on the girl's face. "Quitting when we had an empire in our grasp."

Kathy Ferguson let her father's head down carefully, reaching for the shotgun in slow, deliberate movements. As the gun came to her shoulder and Curt realized what she was going to do, he stepped forward into the room.

"Stay out of this, Graber!" Kinkead's command was a stern sound in the room, and Curt glanced up to see the man's gun covering him threateningly. As he met Kinkead's glance as he saw the fanaticism and mockery in the older man's eyes. It was an odd look and a familiar one. He remembered the look of Kathy Ferguson when she'd told him of Billy Robbins' death and of the power of Major Atwill Kinkead.

And now it was there, clear and magnified before his eyes: this fanaticism of Kinkead's that had infected the girl, too. It was almost a tangible thing in the room. "Don't do it, Kathy!" Allan Shafer, dominated by the will of the girl, stood before her, pleading for his life.

In the split-second interval before he

moved, Curt saw the whole thing, realizing that it was not a little fort and a single man's dream, but an actual, living threat: that the existence of this man was the nucleus of a power that could reap the wealth of the Comstock and lay it at the feet of a rebel nation. A man setting out to destroy the United States! War was inevitable. The success of Kinkead's plan, the millions in silver bullion produced from the mines of Sun Mountain would be diverted from the United States. He remembered then, the ranch on the Sacramento and the country which had given it to him in five short years.

As the girl's finger tightened upon the trigger of the shotgun, Curt made his draw and the two heavy guns were a familiar weight within the expert grip of his hands. The guns cocked and exploded in a smoothness of action that only years of training and careful practice could have touched.

It wasn't Curt's intention to hurt the girl, but with the necessity of Kinkead before him, he sent a prayer with the left hand shot. The shotgun blasted flame into the room simultaneously with Curt's two shots and the roaring sounds of the other men's guns. Fire touched its brand along Curt's cheek and he knew that his shot had gone home to Kinkead that the bullet scarring his cheek had been fired purely by reflex.

But he stood rooted suddenly, watching unbelievably as Kathy Ferguson, her eyes round in shock, stiffened and fell forward, blood gushing from a gaping, blackened hole torn from the side of her neck. He'd been sure of that left shot and the high, spanging sound of his bullet's ricochet from the barrel of the shotgun. But in his haste he had forgotten Allan Shafer, turning now to catch the glitter of the man's eyes above his gun as the hammer made its sharp sound and Curt knew he was out-drawn.

(Continued on page 130)

FENCED OUT!

By Glenn Pierce



The cattle breaking through the wire were almost upon him.

The thundering stampede of three thousand bawling white-faces sent Marr Graham to powder-smoke glory, holding the lighted fuse in his teeth!

MARR GRAHAM kicked his big black into a run after a half-dozen stragglers, worked them back into the bobbing, rumbling herd. He heard Jerry whoop on the other side of

the dust cloud, but could not see him, the dust was so thick. Whitey was somewhere in the rear—he always kept as close as possible to the cook's outfit.

Marr grinned to himself. There it was—his first big stock drive—fifteen hundred head. He swung in his saddle, tried to see the M Bar G through the dust, and couldn't make it. It was there, though—broad and rich and prosperous, centering one of the last free range areas in the state.

He looked up at the sky, frowned briefly. Clouds were closing in, and the sun had already disappeared behind the hills. Hadn't got started as early as they'd planned. But they'd pass McLane's and would be over the ridge before it got too dark to travel.

Marr was tall and dark and thin. He had a stubborn look, the look of a man who by main strength had carved something from nothing, a prosperous range from the rocky soil of Long Valley. His nose was prominent and arched, and his eyes were deep-set, which gave them a sober appearance. But they softened as he glanced at the McLane house.

He'd told Anne he would be passing sometime that day, although he wouldn't have time to eat the pie she offered to bake for him. He told her to wave from the upstairs window that faced the east. It was gloomy in the growing dusk, and his herd made the air thick with dust, but he was sure he could see her if she waved.

She'd be there if her father didn't prevent it. Old Tom McLane was a farmer. He'd moved into the range country when barbed wire was being stretched all over the plains, and he'd expected it to be stretched here in Long Valley. But the cowmen had held out, and Tom McLane was out of step and bitter.

Whitey tore himself away from the grub wagon long enough to gallop to Marr's side. His hatless, straw-colored thatch was rumpled in the wind.

"Gettin' dark and goin' to storm," he howled over the rumble of hoofs, his elbows flapping as he galloped. "We better speed up for the next hour."

Marr nodded assent, and Whitey fell back to the rear. He drew his gun and fired, whooped like a banshee. The skittery rear guard put down their heads and surged thunderously into the rumps of the cows ahead. Marr yipped loudly, and from the other side of the herd Jerry caught on and did his share of yelling.

Reluctantly, Marr turned away from the McLane house. Anne was not there. No one waved from the east upstairs window.

Gloomy clouds rolled overhead, their bottoms ripped jaggedly by the crags of the Stallion mountains ahead. The herd was really moving now. Marr hoped fervently the thunder would hold off until they reached the pass. A stampede on this upslope might be hard to control.

They thundered onward, the dust cloud rolling over the bobbing rumps. Jerry whooped again. . . .

Then it happened. Cows in the van bellowed and screamed in terror. Through the murk, Marr saw the herd pile up—cattle climbing on each others' backs, roaring their panic, a weaving, terrible mass of horns and heads and rolling eyes and scrambling bodies.

Pulse thumping, Marr spurred the big black to a dead run to circle the spread-out van and discover the trouble. The horse willingly responded, then seemed to falter in mid-stride. There was a smashing blow, and Marr felt himself flying through the air, his feet lifted from the stirrups.

He arched to a smashing fall, his face scraped along the hard, scratchy earth, and he could feel the warm blood flow. He was dazed, half-blinded. His shoulder burned and throbbed. Wobbling, he pulled himself to his feet, staggered upright.

The black also was struggling to rise, but he was having trouble. He fell back twice, then finally made it, limped agonizingly in a circle. Red blood dripped down his glossy, sweat-darkened coat.

The cattle were still piling up along the invisible barrier. Whitey had seen it in time, was endeavoring to slow down the rush. But it came like the flood from a broken dam. There was a sharp *twang!*—repeated twice—and from the strands of barbed wire which had stopped the herd and tripped up the black snapped—and the piled-up herd charged through.

Marr saw it come with his brain still dazed and uncomprehending. Then he realized his position, tried to run. His legs felt as if they belonged to somebody else, and he had the terrible sensation of a dream in which pursuit gains ever and one's legs are slow as lead.

He struggled onward as the wild-eyed leaders plunged toward him. Then they were on him, and he flung himself face downward, pressing his nose in the earth, his arms over his head, wondering if there would be enough left to bury.

The thunder of hoofs shook the ground like an earthquake. Whitey's last whoop sounded faint and far away. . . .

MARR woke up in bed—his own, with Whitey looking down at him with troubled eyes. He felt as if his muscles had been pounded with a mallet. Every breath wracked his body with pain; when he blinked, pains shot through his bruised skull.

He tried twice before the words came, and when they did, they were hoarse and croaking, as if the voice belonged to two other people.

"What—time is it?" He was thinking about the herd, wondering if it had passed the crest.

"What time is it?" Whitey echoed with a humorless smile. "It's ten o'clock in the morning—Tuesday!"

"Tuesday!" It took a moment for the notion to penetrate his shocked brain. "That's three days—!"

"You ain't been so healthy," Whitey said kindly. "You'll be holdin' your collar bone in a sling for a couple of weeks, and I don't reckon you'll be walkin' straight up and down. . . ." His eyes hardened. "McLane's barbed wire sort of had important effects on you."

Marr turned his head quickly—then wished he hadn't. He closed his eyes against the stabbing agony, waited until it subsided. "McLane! Was that *his* fence—?"

Whitey nodded commiseratingly. "The old buzzard got tired of waiting for a fence law, so he put one up anyways."

Marr swallowed, remembered with sick realization that Anne had not been at the window. The fencing situation had always been a sore point between them. She had the typical nester's viewpoint that a fenced range was a safer and better one. She could not see that the old ways were best, that Long Valley had held out for something important. . . .

"The herd?" he asked weakly.

"We brought it back. Wasn't hurt bad. Scratched up some. Two or three trampled to death. Your hoss got it about as bad as any of the cows. But he's snappin' out of it." Whitey regarded him anxiously. "Do you reckon you can talk?"

"Why?" Misery lay like a blanket on Marr's spirit.

"Some fellers in the other room. They got things to say, if you feel up to it."

Marr guessed who they were. "I'm up to it."

Whitey led them in. Al Cline, owner of the Rocking Chair, tall and stooped and lugubrious; big Bert Enders, red-faced and violent, carrying his two hundred and thirty pounds with the driving energy of a locomotive, his fists clenched tight at his sides; Zeb Stewart, grizzled and square and old and tough. A couple of

others, less important, but representing most of the spreads in Long Valley, tailed by Jerry, who grinned with honest pleasure when he saw Marr improved.

They stood in a circle around the bed, and Enders said what was in all of their minds.

"Do you want us to wait for you—or shall we go ahead on our own?" His barrel chest heaved with anger.

A reflexive anger tightened Marr's lungs, gave his voice a metallic twang.

"Wait for me!" he commanded. "It won't be long, I promise!"

IT WAS three weeks before he was ready to go, and every day seemed a thousand hours long. He spent the last four days walking and riding and building up his strength. He didn't want to falter at the last moment. This was one job that was going to be done right. He was surprised to find how cadaverous his lean face had grown when he shaved off his two-weeks' beard. His eyes were even more sunken, and the hard lines around his mouth—deepened by bitter thought—gave him the appearance of a death's head.

He got two letters from Anne during his convalescence. He burned both without opening them.

Then, on a Thursday, he sent Jerry with a message to Bert Enders and Al Cline, and Friday morning he slung his gunbelt around his hips. There wasn't going to be any shooting—there didn't have to be. But he meant business more than he'd ever meant it before in his life, and he intended to show it.

Whitey had the big black saddled for him, and Marr examined the scars on the horse's withers as he had done daily for a week.

"They'll be here in half an hour," Whitey told him. "Keep your pants on."

"I'm used to waiting," Marr said grimly.

Whitey squinted toward the north.

"Somebody comin'," he commented. "Maybe it's Al."

Marr followed his gaze—and the sick feeling that he had finally learned to swallow returned in its full bitterness.

Whitey also recognized the rider. He cleared his throat, hesitated, then asked—"Should I head her off?"

Marr shook his head. His throat was so tight that he could not speak.

Anne McLane galloped up on her palomino, and dismounted briskly by the corral gate. She wore her fringed divided skirt, her Stetson, and her gauntlets—her dude outfit—and Marr knew by that that she had prepared carefully for this visit.

The knowledge softened him not at all. The angry, lead-heavy disappointment still choked him, made his temples throb.

She approached frankly—that was her way. And she stood a few feet from him, gazing directly into his hurt eyes.

"I'm glad you're better, Marr," she said. "I don't suppose you read my letters, so I'll tell you what was in them. Dad—"

"I don't want to hear it!"

"But you're going to!" She did not raise her voice, went on in the following silence. "Dad didn't tell me what he was going to do, and he put up the wire just an hour before you started. I rode down to warn you, but you'd already left. I was following you. . . ."

Marr swallowed. The sick feeling grew. "I—wish I'd known that."

"You ought to read your mail."

There was a silence. Her eyes drifted to the drooping gunbelt. "Why are you wearing that?" she demanded.

"We're coming up to call," Marr said tightly. "Not on you—on your father. Several of us feel the same way."

The worry deepened in her eyes. "You know Dad. You know he'll never give in to threats. People will be hurt."

"People have already been hurt," Marr snapped.

She sighed, and for a moment lost her look of competence. Fright glowed for an instant in her eyes before she suppressed it.

She looked at him, appealing, saw he was not to be swayed. Then she turned back toward her horse, halted, and faced Marr once more.

"If you do this—we're through, Marr. No matter what happens."

He did not answer.

She spoke rapidly, as if the words burned her lips. "Marr—I've liked you because you're not like Bert Enders, because you've got some intelligence in that head of yours which you use once in awhile instead of only your muscle. Why don't you realize that this isn't the best way, for Dad or me or you?" She moved a step toward him, then stopped. "Marr—ask yourself what a cowman wants most! It's open range—and think how badly Dad has hurt you by depriving you of it! But don't stop there—" She studied him, hopefully. "Ask for yourself what a farmer wants most. . . !"

She moved to her horse, and from the saddle shot one remark toward him. "Think about it! And remember—we're through if anything happens—no matter how it turns out!"

Then she turned, sent the palomino on a dead run back toward the northern flats.

"Mebbe we ought to stop her," Whitey suggested hesitantly. "Old McLane'll have time to git away if she warns him now."

Marr was thinking hard—of something else. "You know McLane," he scoffed absently. "He'll never run from anybody or anything!" He thought a moment more—still not of the words he uttered. "He's like she is."

There was a trace of pride in his voice as he watched her slim body gracefully follow the rapid movements of the galloping horse. . . .

Marr was thoughtful when the others arrived. Big Bert Enders seized com-

mand, as he always tried to do, but was usually thwarted when Marr was healthy. Now, however, Marr gave tacit assent, and Bert thundered out orders with the satisfaction of a man who knows he can be both bossy and imposing.

"We'll stick together. Only way Tom could git away would be out the back, and I don't think he'll try it. Jerry—you ride around back. That's all the guard we'll need—"

"Tom won't run!" Marr spoke suddenly, recalled to reality by the words.

Enders scowled. "Jerry, you ride around behind the house anyway!" He was not going to be relieved of his command. "If there's any shootin'," he went on, booming, "let Al and me do it!"

Again Marr snapped to attention. "There won't be any shooting—unless some pinbrain tries to show off!" His thin jaw tightened. "And whoever does that'll answer to me!"

Enders glowered. "Nobody's goin' to show off!" His massive fists clenched. "Let's go!"

They rumbled to a trotting start, soon accelerated to a gallop. Marr rode far back in the train, his pain-wracked body slumped sideways, and Whitey glanced from him to Enders, suspicious that the latter was riding fast purposely to leave Marr as far behind as possible. But Marr did not seem to notice. His face was creased in thought.

Long Valley lay gray before them under a low overcast. A faint spray of mist cooled their faces, and the horses liked the damp, springy trail, the brisk air.

The McLane farm was about eight miles up the northern flats. It lay close under a protecting spur of the Stallion mountains on a patch of land the M Bar G had never bothered to take up. It was fully big enough, however, for a prosperous farm, and Tom McLane had planted grain and apples and walnuts, and made them grow.

But the farm was an island in the rolling acres of range which surrounded it, and only after Stallion Creek had trickled through three miles of M-Bar-G bunch grass did it irrigate his fertile cropland. Only a sturdy individualist like Tom McLane, supremely confident in the doom of the open range, would have cast his lot in such a vulnerable position.

Marr still thought heavily as he rode. What had Anne meant by her cryptic remark? Unlike Bert Enders, Marr never permitted rage to control him long, and his desire for revenge was more than neutralized now by his puzzlement at Anne's words.

The open range was sacred to the cattlemen of Long Valley—to a farmer, what would be equally important?

He scowled, as the big black jogged his aching body up the gentle slope. What *was* most important to a farmer? His eyes ranged the green acres of McLane's farm, traced the curving, serpentine bank of Stallion Creek. . . .

They were a hundred yards from the farmhouse now. Marr snapped his fingers. Whitey looked at him curiously, but Marr was too excited to notice. Ignoring the men beside him, he spurred the black to the head of the procession, sided Bert Enders.

He held up a hand. "Wait!" he shouted. "We're not going to take it out of Tom McLane's hide; we don't have to!"

Enders swung toward him, glowering, as the men reined up. "What the hell's got into you, Marr? Come on—Tom's seen us by now—"

Marr shook his head. "That ain't necessary," he stated positively. "We'll treat him the same as he's treated us—and he'll come to time all the quicker—"

"What do you mean?" Enders scowled thunderously. "The only thing that'll show Tom McLane what's what is pressure—applied in person!" He swung in his saddle, appealed to the cowmen. "Ain't that

right, boys? Marr here is going soft."

They responded willingly. "Yeah!" "Give him the works!" "A little lead'll start him jumpin'—"

Marr glared at them. "You dirty sons of guns!" he shouted. "I believe you ain't so much interested in solvin' this range problem as you are in beating up on a nester! I came out here to preserve our open range—not to shoot a gun!"

That split them. Some, with Whitey and Jerry, sided with Marr. Others, belligerent and noisy, edged toward big Bert Enders. Enders sat his gray confidently, a tight smile twisting his lips, regarding Marr's stooped, pain-thin body as a satisfactorily inadequate hurdle. He waited, then—

"Fellers!" He raised a hand. "Marr ain't feelin' well. He's gittin' soft—fer various reasons!" He winked broadly, and there rose a murmur of assent. All knew of Marr and Anne McLane. "Now, I come to chase the nesters out of Long Valley, and I don't aim to do it by no roundabout hedgin'!" He rose in his stirrups, spurred the gray to a run. "Let's go!" He whooped, yanked out his .44, sent two slugs whamming into the quiet, misty air.

More than half thundered after him. Marr swore under his breath, wondered if he could do what he knew he had to do—for there was murder in Bert Enders' eyes.

He sent the black after the gray, angled it toward the hills. The men following Enders yelled, but did not interfere. At every step of the black, Marr's aching muscles and dizzy brain protested, screaming, but he forced himself to keep on.

The two horses smashed together, shoulder to shoulder. The gray lost his footing, tumbled scrambling to the grassy ground. Enders thudded to a sliding stop on the damp grass, turned the air loudly blue with his oaths, kicked free of his stirrups, struggled to his feet.

With a quick movement that made his senses reel, Marr dismounted, swung to meet the big man. He had only one opportunity—a single, lone chance to turn the day to his needs, to save Tom McLane. He leaped for it, drove his fist smashing with what remained of his invalid's strength—straight to the cleft angle of Bert Enders' anvil-shaped chin.

The shock of the blow pushed his finger bones, he felt, into accordion pleats, rippled pain and numbness up his arm, sent black fuzzy spots circling before his eyes. He knew only one thing—if that one blow had not done the trick, he would have no time to give another. He was finished. . . .

As the weaving landscape settled to an even keel in Marr's vision, he clutched the horn of the black's saddle, gaped foolishly at the body of the big man who lay limp as a wet blanket on the turf before him.

HE WAS conscious also of Enders' adherents muttering and shifting back toward Whitey and Jerry. . . .

He took a deep, quivering breath, tried to get some strength into his shaky voice.

"Fellers," he said, "anybody who wants to help me open up the range again in Long Valley—come on!"

He had to try twice before he could find the strength to swing himself aboard the black's heavy saddle.

They all followed—all save Bert Enders, who was sitting up rubbing his chin as they left. Marr sent Jerry on an errand, and led the others away from the McLane house and up to the M-Bar-G land near the Stallions, where Stallion Creek emerged from a chapparal-clad ravine.

He turned in his saddle and grinned at the others. "Jerry'll be here in a minute with the shovels," he explained. "I'm goin' to set here and watch you fellers dig. That's the mark of a good general, anyhow—watchin' other people do his

work." They had to think for a moment before they saw his plan—then broad grins broke out on their gaunt sun-blackened faces.

"This is the way it'll work," Marr went on for the benefit of the mental stragglers. "We're going' to dam up Stallion Creek and divert it to the old dry wash that goes *around* McLane's place—not through it."

Jerry approached with shovels clattering. They dismounted and set to work.

Al Cline moved toward Marr, and regarded him with respect. "This is a damn good idee," he complimented. "You got sharp wits, Marr."

Marr shook his head and grinned as he leaned over the saddle-horn. "This ain't my idee," he said. "You'd be surprised if you knew whose it was!"

* * *

A week later Tom McLane rattled up to the M-Bar-G bunkhouse in his buggy.

"Hello, Tom," Marr grinned.

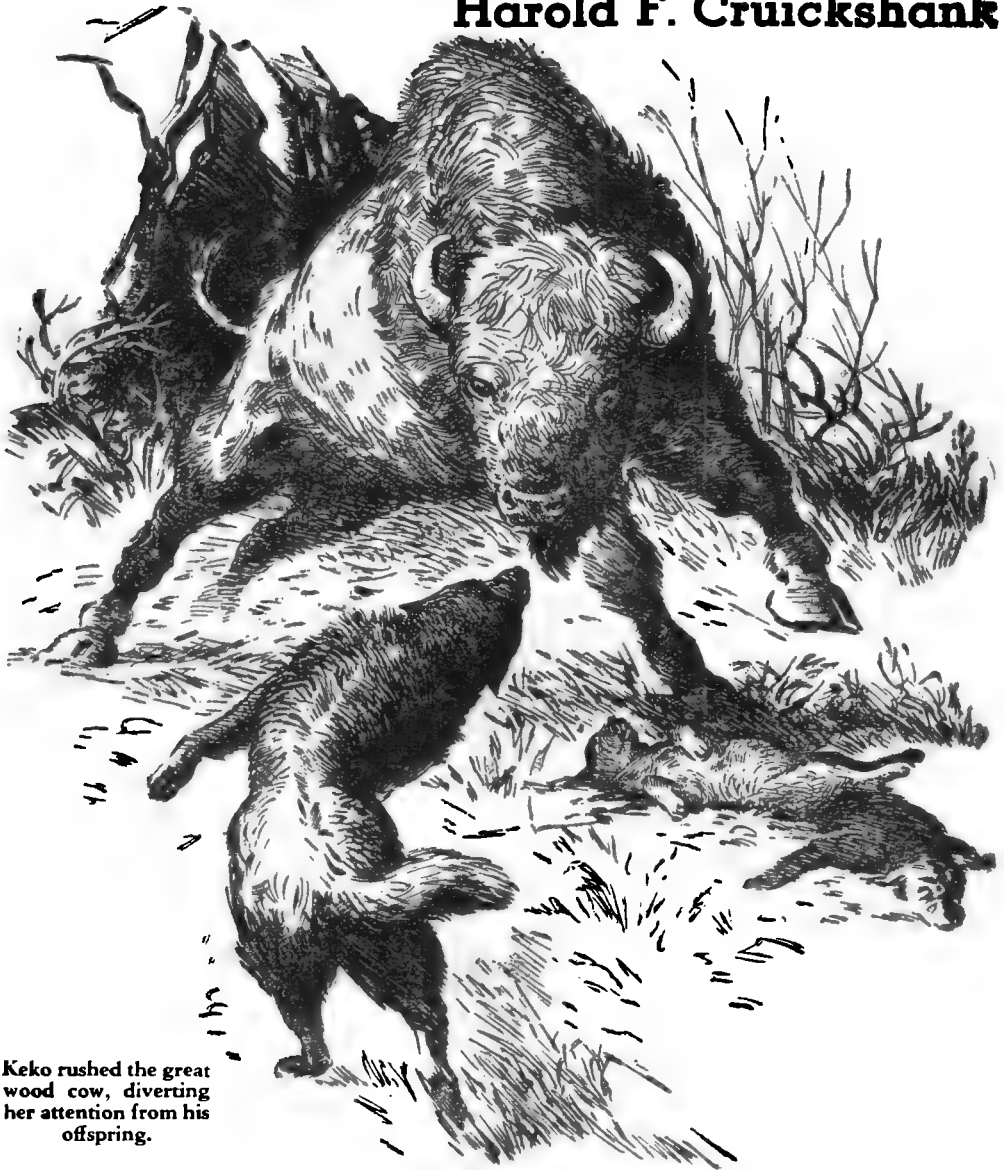
"Jest wanted to tell you," McLane grunted, "I took down the fence. Don't see no reason why you can't run your cows over my back pasture. Don't hurt nothin', twice a year."

McLane turned toward the buggy, said over his shoulder, "You'll get a fresh pie. When Anne found out I was comin' down here today, she postponed her bakin' from today to tomorrow." He removed his hat, scratched his head in perplexity. "She's a smart girl. She had three hogsheads o' water all set up 'fer an emergency," she said." He squinted at Marr. "How'd she know there was goin' to be one? . . . You know, young feller, there's things about this that ain't right clear in my mind—"

Marr's grin had become a permanent fixture. "Don't worry, Pop," he advised. "Thing'll get clearer right along. . . . What kind of pies is she bakin'—?"

The Return of Keko

By
Harold F. Cruickshank



Keko rushed the great wood cow, diverting her attention from his offspring.

With slashing fangs and wily cunning, Keko, wolf monarch, fought for his forest kingdom, pitting his strength against the savage wood cow and the dread, death-dealing fire-sticks of the man creature!

KEKO, the king wolf, lolled in the shade of a clump of Saskatoon berry shrubs. One of his great forepaws was laid lightly over the back of a sprawled, handsome young dog whelp, his son and the son of Iskwa, Keko's gold

and white collie mate of three years.

The big wolf leader rested peacefully, save that now and then his nose wrinkled as a mosquito made an attack. Keko had left his mate and the rest of their brood at the den area. He had watched Iskwa herd her four whelps down into the den, leaving the biggest out playing with Keko.

It was peaceful along the Upper Smoky range. Now and then a light summer breeze brought the tang of wood smoke, but Keko had long since learned to identify it as coming from the zone of the man creatures across the creek.

It was the sudden stirring of the whelp that brought Keko to his feet. All in the one motion he bounded to all four paws and whirled into wind—head high, his nose quivering. Then suddenly his lips peeled back and his hackles rose. On the freshening breeze there came the tang of Iskwa and the whelpings.

A softly gasped snarl escaped Keko. Iskwa had again broken the rules of the wild wolf kind. She had stolen from the lair zone with her young, to forage for herself.

And now another scent alarmed Keko. It was a powerful, strange animal scent, not at once identifiable.

Quickly the king wolf spun and nudged his son toward the den mouth. The little one whirled and snapped at his sire's muzzle, but Keko struck him with closed jaws, sending him yelping down into the den. Then like a whirlwind Keko leaped forward in magnificent stride.

It was not long before he skidded to a halt, arrested by the savage battle snarls of Iskwa. Unlike her wild wolf cousins the beautiful golden one snarled and growled in battle action.

Keko bounded forward and soon his cold yellow eyes were shot with hot blood as he glimpsed the strange creature—a huge cow wood buffalo beyond which stood two calves. At a terrific rush by the shaggy, horned creature, Iskwa whipped

to one side, but not in time to wholly escape a glancing blow from one of the big cow's horns. Eetuk, the cow, a dirty, creamy-white albino, had strayed from her protected range to the north to give birth to rare twin calves which now she protected.

Keko swiftly went into action. Snuffing the strong buffalo scent from his nostrils he whipped in, to taunt, to feint, to draw the bellowing cow from further attack on Iskwa. For all her great bulk, Eetuk whirled and thrust with amazing speed. Keko felt the light scrape of a horn along his flank. But he was unhurt. His hackles were permanently lifted now because to his nose had come the death scent of one of more of his younglings.

He fought with passionate anger, but exercising great caution, realizing in his instinctive wisdom that he could not hamstring this big creature alone.

Iskwa had crawled off, to flop to her belly near her two remaining young ones—youngsters terrified by the roars of the huge, strange buffalo beast.

It was these roaring bellows that at last reached the man creature Dan Martin, the homesteader up creek.

Martin paused at his fence mending to cast a sharp glance at his lovely wife Betty. They were accustomed to wild life sounds, but never before had they heard such booming roars as which came from down the winding creek.

"What do you think, Dan?" Betty asked.

Martin shook his head.

"Sounds a lot like a bull on the rampage," he answered. "We can't have had neighbors pull in overnight without having discovered it. I'd best go take a look-see. I—Betty, I heard Iskwa then. . . ."

DAN MARTIN, in his bachelor days, had trapped this whole area. It was he who had captured Keko, a starving wolf whelp, bringing him to his cabin

where his collie bitch nursed a litter of pups. It was here at this homestead yard that the little Keko had, in company with a little female collie pup, developed to maturity. . . It was from this yard that Keko and Iskwa had escaped, to mate for life. . . . Iskwa! Dan recognized her snarls and at once realized that danger threatened his wild neighbors Keko and his kindred which for the past few years had roamed the range west of the creek homestead.

Dan hurried to get his rifle and head down creek.

As Dan sifted along the creek bank the guttural bellowings became stronger. Pausing a moment to listen, he again heard the snarls of Keko's mate. . . .

Iskwa had recovered from the shock of the cow's first attack. She had leaped from the side of the whelps to give Keko assistance. Together they struck like lightning, whipping back or to one side or the other as the ponderous creature rushed. Keko's fangs had slit the cow's thick muzzle, but the pain seemed to excite her to further and more terrible battle action.

It was thus Dan Martin fetched up close to the scene. He gasped almost aloud as he glimpsed the almost perfect albino creature.

"Wood buffalo!" he said. "A stray from the north herd and—an—albino!" But he broke off sharply. The cow, ponderous head down, was rushing. He saw Iskwa attempt to whip to one side. Before he could jerk up his rifle and fire, the old cow had hooked with a sharp horn. Iskwa went spinning through space to crash heavily.

Dan pulled and the sudden crash of strange gun thunder sent the cow spinning in her tracks. She was not hit. Dan Martin, a game guardian, knew how strongly the buffalo were protected.

Now with a speed that belied her great bulk Eetuk lowed to her calves and hurri-

caned to cover. Keko, signalling to his whelps and to his mate, had bounded to the cover of the alder thickets. But Iskwa was down. When she attempted to rise, to join her mate, her hind quarters sagged.

As the man approached, she snarled savagely, her lips peeled back across her teeth. The man called softly to her, but Iskwa had long since become a creature of the wild wolf environment and despite her natural instinct not to fear man, she did fear all man creatures.

"Okay, beautiful," Dan said softly. . . . He talked to her as he had talked in bygone days. "I'll be back and have a closer look. Seems like you're hurt in a hip. I can only hope it isn't broken, for—" Two dead whelps, horribly gored, had been caught by Dan's eyes. This was bad. Keko would not rest until vengeance had been exacted.

Dan turned. He would come back, with his wife and young son Jimmy. He would rope the collie and see what he could do for her, carrying her back to the homestead if necessary. . . .

AS THE man disappeared Iskwa raised her muzzle and sniffed sharply. Weakly she sent out a call. There was a stirring in the older brush and soon Keko was mincing in to her side. For a time, Keko was very much alert. The fresh tang of man scent was strong, but at last he sank his muzzle beneath Iskwa's warm body and thrust her to her feet. For a long moment she sagged limply against his strong side, then buckled at a hind quarter and went down.

Keko minced choppily about her. When the whelps came whimpering in, he buffeted them back. They cowered down, licking their chops. They were hungry.

When at last Keko heard the faint foot-falls of man creatures along the creek, he rushed forward and butted his mate in a shoulder. Again he helped raise her and painfully she staggered along from the

site of battle, as Keko hazed her slowly on toward the creek whose waters and muck would help stanch the flow of blood in her near side hip, and reduce her fever. But such first aid could not quickly heal the torn ligament.

As the man creatures came through the thickets, Keko and his mate and broodlings were in cover, freezing, waiting till all was clear.

It was close to sunset when at last, scarcely able to drag herself along, Iskwa managed to slither on down to the cool depths of her den where swiftly her three remaining whelps started pummeling her.

Outside, Keko moved stiff-leggedly about the zone. He tossed his great head and exposed his gleaming fangs in pent up anger. But suddenly he whirled, to go bounding off toward the north east and shortly, in a willow-studded meadow he began to hunt.

* * *

Within fifteen minutes or so, the king wolf was trotting back to the home area, a big limp rabbit in his strong jaws. At the entrance to the den he made soft sounds which Iskwa understood. Her whelps, now well stuffed, were asleep; she painfully crawled up the incline, to the open. Fitfully, she tore at the rabbit hide, but despite her great need for food, she only barely tasted the succulent warm flesh. Soon she dragged herself back to her lair where in her bed she lay blinking into the gloom. She had paid a stiff price for her lapse of wisdom in stealing off to hunt alone. . . .

Not until all was still around the lair—until he was satisfied that no danger lurked, did Keko relax. Hungry, he wheeled, to go streaking on toward the creek zone where in the willow and alder scrub he hunted. Suddenly his magnificent form leaped, to catch a cock grouse three feet in flight above ground.

When every scrap of the grouse was finished, Keko turned and nose to the ground moved on along a chain of narrow meadows and before full dark settled, he was bellied down, finishing his supper on a freshly-killed buck rabbit. . . .

As the first stars winked coldly in the summer night sky and brooding sheet lightning shuddered along the northern horizon, Keko, the great, glided back to his den there to curl his body, nose into wind, sharp rears pricking back and forth as he rested—on guard, alert throughout the night.

There followed for Keko weeks of fierce hunting and added responsibility. Iskwa had barely sufficient strength with which to build up strength for her ravenous whelps. She nudged them up to the outside. There Keko took over. He at once seemed to understand that the whelps must be weaned. He brought to them tidbits of grouse and watched over them as they fought for small scraps of soft, tender meat. He instructed them as to how to grind soft green bone, buffeting them every now and then with his big muzzle.

Every now and then the king wolf stole to the entrance to the den where he whimpered softly, urging his mate to come to the outside. But never did he enter the den. At this season of the year such was not his privilege.

Throughout this long period, Keko's keen sense of smell told him that the great buffalo creature and her young were still on his home range. Eetuk ruled the range like a tyrant matriarch, guttering her throaty bellows when danger threatened, or charging through the brush for no apparent reason, save that hordes of flies and ticks pestered her and her young.

When on occasions Keko could not catch her scent he was no less aware of her presence. Cowbirds hovered over her, marking her position. The birds lighted on to her back, privileged and welcome

visitors, for they helped clear her shaggy form of ticks.

This morning, head high, Keko stretched up on his favorite knoll, his muzzle pointed into wind, searching for danger scent. He was alone. The whelps slept in the den with Iskwa.

It was thus poised, the strange man creature found him. There was no Iskwa to warn him of the man's approach.

At the crash of gunfire, the great king wolf toppled over, lost to view, the far side of the knoll.

Jerking a fresh cartridge into the breech of his Winchester, the man moved quickly forward. Hank Naylor, deputy game guardian on the north wood buffalo range, was proud of his shooting. It was part of his business to destroy such predators as the big wolf he had just shot. Especially was he interested in killing wolves, since he had been assigned to hunt for the strayed albino wood buffalo cow—a rare prize of the government-protected wild range herd.

He had, a day or so ago, come across Eetuk's tracks and knew that shortly he would see her. His plan was, when her rare twin calves were grown more, to corral the trio, ready for shipment back to the range.

Now, rifle at the ready, Naylor stepped up to the knoll. He did not anticipate having to shoot again. The big wolf had dropped heavily.

But suddenly his blows flicked up. His eyes were wide and his lower jaw sagged. There was no sign of Keko.

Quickly Naylor moved in, dropping to a knee to examine the blood-stained grass.

Swearing in complete and bitter disappointment, he leaned his rifle against a clump of willows, and took a seat on a knoll, to rest and eat a trail snack. He glared in the direction the wounded Keko had taken promising shortly to be on that blood trail. Suddenly he heard brush crackle off to his right, and swung to

reach for his rifle, but it was well out of his reach.

It was a man's form which broke through the brush.

Dan Martin had heard the shot coming to him from the direction of Iskwa's den zone. He had hurried from his haying operations at the meadows. . . . Not always did a shot disturb the Martins, for nomadic trappers often hunted deer for food, but this morning, Dan was, if not fearful for his friendly wild neighbors, curious.

MARTIN glanced sharply from the stranger to Iskwa's den area. For some time he had missed seeing Iskwa, but now he gave his attention to the man, who had got to his feet.

"You fire that shot?" Dan asked.

"That's right. Who's asking?"

"Martin's the name—homesteader from across the creek. Game guardian for this area."

Hank Naylor's heavy brows flicked up. He stepped forward, offering his hand, which Martin readily accepted.

"Name's Naylor, Hank Naylor. My boss told me about you. Recommended that I look you up if the trail of the missing albino buffalo cow took me into your district."

"You mean you're with the Department of Game and Fisheries—up on the wood buffalo range? Good . . . But what did you shoot at, Naylor?"

"The biggest silver-gray timber wolf I ever saw, Martin. He was standing right on that knoll—perfect target. I think I've hit him badly, and figure to take up his blood trail soon. Got to protect that albino cow, you know. She—" He broke off sharply, his face twisting strangely as he caught the fierce light spilling from Martin's eyes.

"You—shot, hit, Keko, Naylor! Keko!" Dan said huskily.

"Keko?" Naylor's mouth was partly

open as he stared at the homesteader. "What's this all about, Martin? You look like you wanted to murder me? What's this Keko business?"

Martin turned to stare at the lair zone, then swung sharply back to face Naylor.

"I reckon I must look a bit like murder, Naylor," he said coldly. "Keko is the king wolf of the Upper Smoky range. I raised him from whelphood—took him from under his dead mother's body. I raised him with a little collie pup, a bitch, with whom he mated . . . Your damned albino wood buffalo injured the collie. How badly she's hurt I don't know. She may be dead. If she's alive, you've crippled her only means of survival—Keko."

A slow grin twisted Naylor's mouth corners. Secretly he figured a man, a homesteader, who'd spill so much sentiment over a crippled dog wolf was "bushed," light in the head, and yet his boss, Chief Game Guardian, Frank Dean, had highly recommended that he visit this man Martin . . . The grin was slowly wiped from Naylor's face as Dan caught at his arm.

"Move slowly . . . Turn around easily and you'll see what I mean. Naylor," Dan whispered hoarsely.

There was some scant cover between the men and the wolf den. Slowly the game guardian turned, to see an emaciated collie form nudging along before her three half grown, strangely marked wolf whelps. Iskwa was attempting to haze her small brood to safety, for her keen nose had picked up the tang of Keko's blood scent, mingled with the dread tang of the man creatures.

Martin quivered. Never had he seen Iskwa in such poor condition. She dragged a hind quarter, yet she gallantly struggled on, attempting to move her young to a safer sector.

"You—see—what I—mean, Naylor?" Dan spoke through compressed lips.

The deputy turned and nodded.

"I can understand, Martin. You say it was the buffalo cow crippled her that way?"

"That's right . . . I saw some of the action. Now you'd best hit for my place across the creek, Naylor. Have supper with us. I'm taking Keko's blood trail. Got to find out how badly he's hit. If you've killed him, it will be bad here on the wild range. He and Iskwa have been neighbors a long time. They seem to understand that I never would do them any harm. They, themselves, do a lot more good than harm by keeping other killer packs off the range."

Dan turned and started off along the blood trail, soon to discover that the deputy was trailing him.

Moving along the rim of a shallow draw, Dan suddenly turned sharp left. Shortly, Naylor saw him freeze and silently drew up alongside. Ahead, nearly two hundred yards distant, crossing the neck of a narrow meadow, was the great Keko, pushing on toward the nearest slough. Every now and then the men saw him buckle at the fore quarters. Now he paused, half turned, his long tongue lolling. He turned as if to search for sign of his kindred.

"You must have creased him across the top of his shoulders, Naylor," Martin observed. "Let's hope he hasn't lost too much blood. . . I'd rather lose half my stock than see that old wolf die."

LATER that evening as Martin and Naylor sat smoking on the stoop of the little log house, Dan suddenly started, swinging sharply to face the north west. He'd heard a faint call. It came again. Naylor heard it and Betty coming out to join the menfolk froze where she stood. Her lips framed the name, "Iskwa!"

And then from a point off right, fairly close in, there came the unmistakable call of Keko.

"Ou-u-u-u-u-u-u . . ."

"Keko!" Martin said, getting to his feet. He stood poised, head cocked on one side to again catch the howl of Keko's collie mate. It was closer now. Evidently Iskwa had located Keko and was dragging her wounded form through the brush to join him. Now Dan turned to the game guardian.

"It sounds all right, Naylor," he said softly. "So long as that mad-brained albino cow of yours doesn't catch up with them, in their present weak condition. I simply can't allow those two neighbors to be destroyed." Dan broke off. He strode to the cabin returning in a moment or so with his rifle.

"You mean you intend to shoot the cow, Martin?" Naylor asked. "You know the consequences: I'd have to do my job, you understand."

"I'll take a chance, Naylor. Perhaps I can scare her off, but I intend to protect Keko and his mate. Have you got any other ideas?"

Naylor was on his feet. He shot glances from Martin to Betty and back to Dan.

"Your feeling for those wild critters is pretty strong, folks," he said. "But I've still got my job to do. I represent the law, you know. My orders are, if I spot the cow, to arrange to have her corraled. She's wanted, I think, for a big zoo. But I'll work with you, I—"

"Ou-u-u-u-u—" The close in cry of Keko cut Martin off short.

Dan Martin heaved a deep sigh.

"Sounds like the danger is over for the time being," he said. "Keko's returning to his home range. But, Naylor, I can't guarantee the safety of the cow and her twin calves after Keko and Iskwa regain their strength. The old cow killed a couple of their whelps. She's a menace, a threat to the safety of the others. . . ."

"You said twin calves again, Martin. You mean old Eetuk has twins? That's quite rare. Are they marked like her at all?"

Martin shook his head.

"No. They're dark, natural," he answered. "Well, where do we go from here? Still insist on trying to kill off Keko?"

A slow smile gathered at Naylor's mouth corners. He filled and lit his pipe, then turned to the Martins.

"I'm shoving off in the morning. Got to contact headquarters," he said. "Then I'll be back to arrange for building a corral. Eetuk won't shift range while her calves are so young. While I'm gone, I'll be relying on you to protect that buffalo outfit . . . I'll not shoot to hit any of your friends, unless, later on, I catch them in the act of threatening the life of my charges. Fair enough?"

"Agreed, Naylor. All's worked out fairly well thus far. Your shooting of Keko has had some good results. It has brought Iskwa from her den. Together, they'll nurse themselves back to normal strength. . . . After that, well, you'd best hustle with that corral and your shipping arrangements. Keko is king of this range. Your cow killed his young. Don't ever imagine the wild creatures haven't an instinctive sense of that old code—'an eye for an eye.' They have! Keko will—"

Dan was cut off by a ringing call from Keko. It came from a point just beyond the beaver dam. Dan laid a hand lightly on the deputy's arm and moved off, stealthily, toward the creek, careful not to crack a single piece of dry windfall rubble. Soon, he halted, freezing. On the meadow stubble, beyond the dam, he saw them clearly outlined in the half moon's light. They stood together—Keko, the king wolf, and his wounded consort. . . . They had come in close to the habitat of man, the friendly man creature who had raised them as if instinctively sensing that here lay some means of protection while in their crippled condition. Martin shuddered, and turning, moved slowly back to join Naylor and Betty.

The summer moved swiftly through to early autumn, when the gabble of wild fowl at the creek, lakes and sloughs marked the fact that an early winter was not far off. The raucous concerto of the feathered creatures gave warning to Keko that the sharp blizzard winds would soon be howling through the tamaracs.

The period at which the warm suns bejeweled the dew-laded, multi-tinted foliage of autumn was short-lived. Savage winds, shifting around from northeast to northwest, at last settled into a prevailing northeasterly screecher bringing biting snow which for two days lashed the range of Keko, before settling to a heavy, steady fall.

Tamaracs snapped and ice tightened at the creek and the lake.

Due to their long illness, Keko and Iskwa were very thin and fiercely ravenous, but their strength had returned and with it a fighting urge to restore their weight. Only a slight limp in her near side hind quarter displayed any sign of Iskwa's injury. She ran the trails with Keko when the heavy snow had ceased falling. Keko, throughout his period of illness had conserved his remaining strength, slowly, but surely building his big handsome form back to a state of normalcy by careful exercising. He was again sound, but his flanks were very narrow as he led his mate over the packing snow toward the range of the wild wood buffalo cow and her young.

Trailing Keko and Iskwa came three big, fully grown young wolves—savagely hungry creatures.

Keko had, more than once scouted for sign of his hated enemy Eetuk. But recently he had been chocked up short in his tracks by the presence of man creatures. . . . Men were busy at the meadow by the frozen slough. From cover Keko had watched them as they constructed a heavy enclosure such as the king wolf knew so well around the habitat of the

friendly man and woman across the creek.

Several days had gone by since his last visit to the slough meadows. Tonight, save for faint traces, there was no alarming man scent, but the tang of Eetuk and her calves' scent was strong, powerfully strong.

Keko paused. He had reached a hummock on which he sat, to thrust his muzzle high. He poured out a long, penetrating call. It was a call to his distant kindred, his young of previous seasons, creatures which, in ordinary circumstances would not venture on to the range of the king wolf. But tonight they heard. They heard the invitation cry and soon there came an answering call and then another and another.

The members of Keko's scattered kindred came fanning down to assemble at the meadows. But soon they were cringing, cowering at the deep-throated bellows of that huge creature within the enclosure. But since their big chieftain manifested no sign of fear, the five sleek wolf forms advanced, drooling at their chops.

IN THE light of the moon Eetuk's ponderous form cast terribly grotesque shadows. Keko had brought his pack in close and was digging frantically under the bottom rail of the heavy tamarac corral fence. His band members now emulated his actions. The cow roared as she charged, to hammer the lower rails with her massive, battering head while her well-grown young ones quivered and sweated at her back.

Eighteen hundred bounds of solid bulk smashed at the rails. Keko was suddenly rocked back. A couple of the lower rails had at last splintered. Eetuk's power had prevailed, but it was the beginning of her undoing, the beginning of Keko's thrust for vengeance.

Now cautiously, signaling to his mate and kindred, he crept in and then like a

flash streaked through the gap in the corral. He hurled himself at once at the cow's muzzle, his fangs raking her.

Eetuk became electrified with amazing swiftness for one so huge. She reared, whirled and struck, hooking savagely at one of Keko's band. He was tossed, smashing hard against the corral rails.

Keko and Iskwa thrust and backed like flashes of chain lightning. The cow caught another of the wolf pack and fiercely jerked her head up and down until she had ripped him wide. . . . Her thundering roars and bellows carried along the creek zone. At the home of Dan Martin it was Betty, out securing her chicken house for the night, who heard the sounds. She hurried to warn Dan and Deputy Naylor who had come down to stand by for the shippers, shortly to arrive.

Outside, the men listened.

"Let's go!" he said sharply. "There's trouble at the corral."

They hurriedly ran for their rifles and moved swiftly along the creek bank, but they had three quarters of a mile to go, through fairly deep snow, without snowshoes. In that time, Keko and his kindred were pressing their attacks.

Now Keko whirled. The cow rushed. Head down, she was making a terrific smash at two of the present season's young ones, but all at once, she came sagging back on her haunches. Keko and a lean old she-wolf had struck from behind. Eetuk was hamstrung and lowed throatily as she crumbled to the stained snow. She had killed and now, killer that she was, her time had come. . . . The vengeance fangs of the king wolf had struck, and swiftly the pack members rushed in. . . .

It was Iskwa which gave the warning signal. Like blurred streaks the wolf band whirled and sifted through the gap in the fence. A fusillade of shots crashed. One wolf was caught in mid leap, to topple, stone dead, but with Keko leading, the

remainder of the pack was led to safety as the dread man creatures hurried forward.

Dan Martin glanced swiftly at the broken fence, then toward Eetuk. He shook his head. . . . Her calves, too, were dead. Dan felt no gloat for Keko's work, but he realized that such was the code of the wild—"an eye for an eye," the fittest must survive! He turned to Naylor.

"I'm sorry for you, Naylor," he said. "Right when you were ready to ship. But I warned you: Keko is king of his range; his young were killed by Eetuk and so—well, here it is! You'd best put a couple of bullets in the buffalo. She—"

"Ou-u-u-u-u-u-u-u- - -" Both men spun at the terrible cry of Keko.

"Your friend, the king wolf, won, Martin," Naylor said huskily. "I've learnt a lesson in natural history. There are plenty of moose and deer for the killing on Keko's range, but he came here to exact his toll of vengeance. . . I'll have a hell of a time convincing the boss I wasn't alert, but - - that's how it goes!" He raised his rifle and fired two shots, then turned again to Martin.

"There's buffalo meat aplenty if you want any," he said. "But, for my part, Keko and his band can have it all."

They turned and moved slowly along the creek bank, watched from several points by gleaming eyes.

Now Keko's hackles rose. He signaled and commenced to steal back to the site of his vengeance kill and shortly, the sound of cutters and grinders savagely at work could be heard above the snapping of frosted brush.

His great feast at last done, Keko trotted to a snow covered hummock. He lofted his muzzle and into the glittering starlight, he sent his long high-pitched call of victory.

"Ou-u-u-u-u-u-u-u- - -" It rang along the wild, frost-tortured range defiantly, as a warning that Keko was still king.

By Harry F.
Olmsted

Guns of the

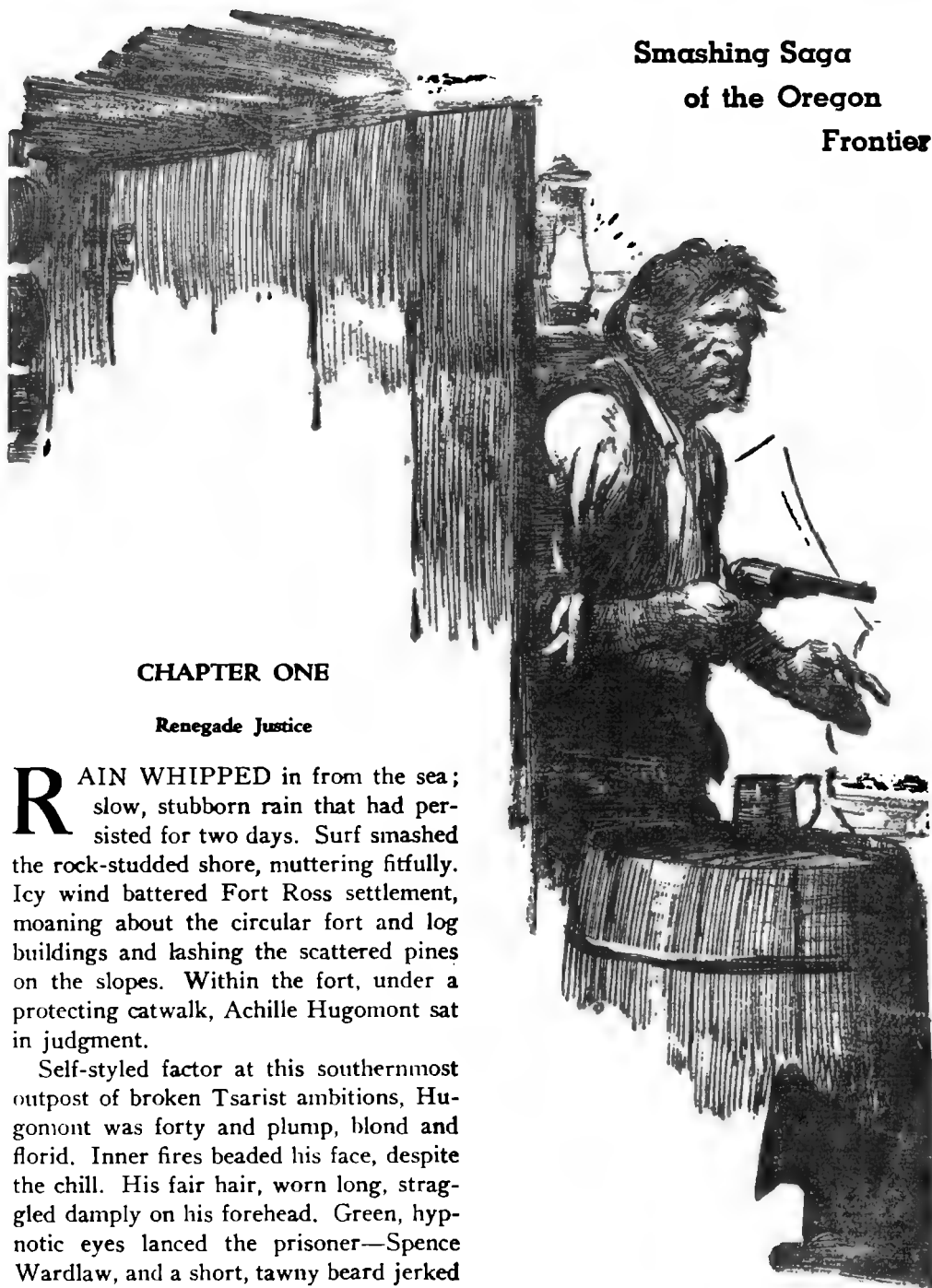
Smashing Saga
of the Oregon
Frontier

CHAPTER ONE

Renegade Justice

RAIN WHIPPED in from the sea; slow, stubborn rain that had persisted for two days. Surf smashed the rock-studded shore, muttering fitfully. Icy wind battered Fort Ross settlement, moaning about the circular fort and log buildings and lashing the scattered pines on the slopes. Within the fort, under a protecting catwalk, Achille Hugomont sat in judgment.

Self-styled factor at this southernmost outpost of broken Tsarist ambitions, Hugomont was forty and plump, blond and florid. Inner fires beaded his face, despite the chill. His fair hair, worn long, straggled damply on his forehead. Green, hypnotic eyes lanced the prisoner—Spence Wardlaw, and a short, tawny beard jerked



Golden Empire

The green eyes of Achille Hugomont, renegade factor of Benediction Bay, flamed with a plan that would wrest a great country from America, and set the world ablaze with war. . . . But first he had to kill Spence Wardlaw and his two trapper pardners, which looked like a simple enough chore, with an army one thousand strong behind him!

Desperately Spence swung his gun up as Jamee came through the door.



when he spoke. In his guttural accent.

"M'sieu' Wardlaw, I am ver' patient. My men catch you at Gaviota Rocks with sea otters. You 'ave no permit, no contract with the Russian Government. Worse, when my men search your place at Benediction Bay they find your partner murdered. You are caught with contraband. Can you prove you did not kill M'sieu' Fine?"

Spence stared sullenly at this autocrat, ornate in the silk, velvet and fine leather of a Mexican grandee and looted probably from some *rico* near Yerba Buena. The one grotesque touch was Hugomont's beret, perched saucily atop his yellow mane. Born a Frenchman, he became a naturalized Russian and interpreter for two Russian governors. When the Muscovites left Fort Ross, Hugomont chose to remain.

Now Spence shifted glance to the slyly amused men behind the factor—a fine collection of unhung rascals. Emaciated Jairus Gifford, deserter from Fort Vancouver after failing in an attempt upon the life of the Chief Factor McLoughlin. Stubby Dolph Janece, expatriated Australian criminal. Caton Fabre, Angelo hating *coureur de bois*. Others equally notorious, including a Spaniard, a Portuguese, several Russian renegades and a sinister Aleut. Judge and jury, trying the junior partner of Fine and Wardlaw—Traders, or Benediction Bay, twenty miles north.

How Spence hated them. He had been shocked dumb when Hugomont's small schooner bore down on him while hunting at the Rocks, poised riflemen menacing him from the bow. Not the arrest, especially, for he was poaching, taking his chances. Nor was it loss of five unfleshed otter skins, two hundred dollars at prevailing rates. But the first words of Caton Fabre, the captain; they were what had flabbergasted him.

"The otters, M'sieu'? They are noz-

zing. Capitaine Hugomont is touched that you hunt for him, without pay. But w'at a pity that you kill your partner when you leave."

Spence's heart had quit. Zeb Fine dead! Partner, teacher, counsellor, friend, he had sailed with the first Boston otter ship, in 1803, under Captain Joseph O'Cain—Spence's legendary grandfather. He had taught Spence to build and ply an Aleut *bidarka*, live off the coast, hunt the otter and skin him alone—no small chore. Together, they had hunted from Alaska to Mexico's Baja California before settling on the Willamette, where inspired Ewing Young persuaded them to locate on Benediction Bay.

SPENCE met Caton Fabre's probing glance, recalling that day on the Rocks. He had read their guilt in deference, lack of brutality. As if they mourned Old Zeb instead of hating him for failure to run from their long continued intimidation. Calmly, he had denied the crime that day. "Haven't seen Zeb in a week. I guess we know who had Zeb killed, Fabre, and why. Don't we?"

"Me, M'sieu'? But no. You leave a week ago, you say. You travel south, dragging skins, running from your crime."

"Running?" Spence scoffed. "Leaving a hundred cured skins? Am I crazy?"

"But no, we find no skins, M'sieu'." Fabre gloated. "Maybe you tell M'sieu' Hugomont where you cache them. Secure the skins, *mes hommes*. Sink his *bidarka*!"

That was how they took him at Gaviota Rocks. Now, next noon, he was on trial, his answers too leisurely for Hugomont. "Answer, M'sieu', or I must 'ave you shot."

Spence felt hopeless. They had surprised Zeb, slain him and taken the skins. *I'm a fool*, he thought, *not to have hidden them and kept Zeb with me*. He knew better. Zeb, rheumatic after forty years of hunting, fought pain, accepted inaction

during the cold months. Spence wanted to ask Hugomont what he had gained by the coup. Surely not control of the otter hunting. Otter were scarce, an ever lessening traffic.

Tonelessly, he said: "I've no proof. I work alone. Gifford and Janece tell of finding Zeb with my knife in his throat. They don't say that I stuck him. They say they found no skins. Give me an hour and I'll turn up proof that they lie."

Hugomont silenced his cursing lieutenants. "You mark your skins, M'sieu'?"

"I dressed them." He glared. "And I'll have pay for them, you hear me?"

The factor and his men choked at the threat of one already condemned. Cool, controlled, Spence glanced toward the gate where a guard shivered, head drawn in, hands pocketed, rifle against the wall. Clouds scudded low, deepening the gloom. Water sheeted the compound, draining lazily. Hugomont's mirth died. "Pay? *Certainement*. I 'ave called in Indians to witness the judgment of the Tsar . . . and Achille Hugomont."

Spence eyed the Russ flag, drenched, gale-shredded atop the tall staff. "Why do you fly that flag, Hugomont? The Russians are gone, selling to Général Sutter—the Swiss-Mexican. Soon he'll come with his aides. The guard behind Spence here. . . ."

"Possession, M'sieu'. Sutter will bring no more than a bodyguard. Too bad you must miss the fun. Who do you think will succeed to his empire, eh?"

"Who?" Spence sneered.

"I am modest, M'sieu." He laughed with his aides. The guard behind Spence chortled. Spence drew his hands from warm pockets, purposely dropping a tarnished shilling—overlooked in their search. The watchful guard stooped. Spence waited till he touched the coin, lashed back with a heavy, salt-hardened boot. Crunch of iron hobs against flesh. A cry, ending in a moan. The guard fell.

Spence stooped for his musket. The astonished renegades, so secure in numbers they had staged this travesty with nothing more than a few pocket pistols, looked into the muzzle of Spence's cocked weapon.

Now, save for the gate guard, Spence could have herded them into the cell house and taken over the fort. But that guard must be reckoned with. Hugomont, rallying, was bellowing: "Pierre! *Garde à vous! Prisonnier mutine!*"

Sick that he must waste the opportunity to avenge Old Zeb, Spence backed, spun about. The gate guard uncoiled, dove for his weapon. It was a desperate gamble, but Spence leaped toward the gate, the *mousquet* cocked before him. He was half way to the gate when a pistol ball kicked water beside him. He changed to a zig-zag run. The gate guard was in the guardhouse now, gun lined against the door jamb.

Spence raced on, dodging to distract aim. He feared nothing else now—only the one shot. The guard would not have time to reload. By the same token, Spence could fire but once, something he wanted to avoid. His chance outside was slim without a loaded weapon.

Doubt like a dark shadow clouded his mind as he twisted toward the guardhouse, palm shielding the priming, feet churning water whipped by bullets, rain needling his cheeks. Closer! Closer! Elusiveness nullified with every lessening foot. Why didn't the man shoot? The gun barrel shifting to match his swerving. A baleful eye squinted above the cocked flint. Behind him chorusing yells, pistol shots, splashing boots. Spence was within a rod when the guard fired. Struck in the face, Spence went blind, staggered, felt himself falling.

SPENCE stumbled, stayed erect. His vision cleared. And suddenly he knew. A rammed wad, not the bullet, had struck

him. He was unharmed. The guard, seeing him falter, roared from his cubby, empty gun uplifted. His missed swing carried the weapon to the wet earth, shattering the stock. Spence's gun barrel thudded. The guard dropped. Spence leaped over him to the gate, swung it outward.

A group of Indians, answering Hugomont's call and halted by the tumult, recoiled from him. He bowled over two, dodged away. Houses shielded him from Hugomont's guns until he reached the slope, where the range was too long. At the top, he paused to blow, smiling at the dozen horsemen spurring after him. The wilderness was his home. Lacking every thing but savvy, he would cheat them, returning later with his answer.

Hope and fear paced Spence as he ran toward Russian River. Thirty miles away lay the ranch of Shane Steelman, friend and Willamette neighbor. Like Spence, Shane had fallen under the spell of Ewing Young, leader of the Willamette settlers, and had moved his horses and cattle to Russian River, adjoining the big ranch of Achille Hugomont.

Hugomont, stocking a paradise with horses, cattle and sheep stolen from careless Mexicans, had grown rich and powerful furnishing meat, hides and tallow to the Russians. Threatened by the Mexican authorities for tax delinquencies, he induced the Russians to build a blockhouse on his ranch. Thereafter the stream lost its Indian name and became Russian River.

Mastering their language, Hugomont served as interpreter during Russian negotiations for otter hunting rights in the south. During that period his men preyed mercilessly upon Steelman. Spence hoped he hadn't met Zeb's fate. Alone with six Tahoose herders and their families, he was defenseless against a Hugomont attack.

From a high crag, Spence watched

baffled pursuers halt, confer briefly and gallop northward. *Heading for Benediction*, he thought. *Why should I go there?* Skins worth five thousand dollars had surely been looted. Should Steelman's ranch be similarly ravaged, Spence would be five hundred miles from the Willamette, alone, unarmed.

The rain held. Soaked and chilled, Spence detoured to a cave discovered last fall, spent the afternoon and night—hungry, worried, lonely. Next morning, the clouds had vanished. The sun shone brilliantly and Spence felt Spring in the air as he went on. Kicking a buck from the brush, he flung up his musket. Though ravenous, he didn't fire. His one bullet might earn his right to live.

Later, descending a timbered slope toward the Hugomont-Fort Ross trail, he heard a voice, halted. Through the trees struck the creek of wheels and presently Shane Steelman's road cart appeared—a rig brought around the Horn and the envy of his Willamette neighbors. Relieved and glad, Spence ran to intercept the rancher, wondering about the cloaked woman beside him.

Again that voice halted Spence. He saw Steelman rein in, draw his pistol and fire. A woman screaming. Steelman laying on the whip, running. Another shot. Spence, frozen, saw Steelman slump, loose the reins. The terrified horse was running away. The woman clung, screaming. With no chance now to head off the runaway rig, Spence looked for the bushwhacker, saw him emerge from the thickets, spurring savagely after the cart.

Again Spence ran, clearing a gully, smashing through brush and gaining the roadway. The charging rider neither swerved, challenged nor slowed. He fired at once. Spence felt the hot breath of the slug and, with the man reaching for another pistol, he aimed and fired, thankful he hadn't shot that buck. The rider shuddered, swayed, crashed to earth. His

pony reared, wildly. Spence dropped his gun, caught the bit ring.

When he had footing, Spence bounced, bounced again and was astride. Clamping the beast's heaving barrel, he found the reins and raced through settling dust. Expecting a chase, he came upon the cart suddenly. The horse was tied. Steelman sat beside the road, bare to the waist. A girl knelt, bandaging him. Spence dismounted, shielding himself against the rancher's upflung pistol. Then Steelman was yelling. "Wardlaw! You . . . you done that shootin'?"

Spence led his pony over. "Not me, Shane. I was upslope. Couldn't head you off. But I got that bushwhacker."

The girl came up, glaring. "That's a lie, dad! I saw him there!"

Spence studied her face, pallid earlier, flushed now. Far from her best, she was very pretty. "This your daughter, Shane?"

Steelman scowled at the girl. "You must be mistaken, girl. Wardlaw, my child—Aimee. She rounded the horn, fetching me bad news. My dear wife's departed this life. Aimee, this is Spencer Wardlaw, otter hunter and good neighbor on the Willamette."

Spence bowed. "Pleased, ma'am, I'm sure."

"Well I'm not!" she rapped. "There were two men. Dad shot one. You wounded him. Mighty peculiar you'd be Johnny-on-the-spot unless. . . ."

"Sure there were two men, Miss Aimee?"

"As sure as I am that you're one of them."

"You need specs," said Spence, sourly, and walked to look at Steelman's wound—bullet creases on either side of his spine. "Scratches, Shane. They'll sting, bleed a little and heal clean."

"One inch deeper, Spence, would have busted my back. Who you think done it?"

"You know already, Shane. You got

one; I got one. Let's go back and have Aimee clear me or decide she saw three men."

The girl flounced angrily into the cart. Spence, needled, helped Shane in and rode back with them to where the dead man lay in the road. Shane didn't know him. Spence appropriated the fellow's two pistols and they went into the roadside brush. Shane gasped, looking at the man he had slain. "Diggins! Remember him, Spence? No, that happened before you hit the Willamette. We tried him for bla'guardy, lashed and banished him. Down here I found him with Hugomont. He's given me a bad time, Spence."

"You're lucky to be alive, Shane."

"Lucky you came along, boy." Steelman shook hands. "Aimee, you apologize."

She didn't answer, just sat in the cart, sulking. *Stubborn, temperful, pretty as a picture*, thought Spence. *She'll lead some fool a merry chase*. Steelman winked. "Miffed. Excuse her, Spence. What fetches you out thisaway?"

"Came to learn if they'd got you, Shane."

"You . . . you suspected they'd try?"

Spence told of Zeb's murder, his own arrest, trial and escape. He told of his need for powder, ball and food. "I'm after Zeb's killer, Shane. Authority for it sits in the factor's chair, at Ross."

Shane sat down, shaken. "God rest Zeb's ashes. Another gone to join Ewing."

"Ewing Young?" Spence started. "He's dead?" And when Shane nodded dumbly, he sighed, recalling the inspired leader of Willamette settlers—one who dared envision Yankee domination of Oregon. Spence recalled their last talk. Pale eyes flashing, Ewing Young had said: "San Diego to Alaska, God's country weakly held, Mexico, Britain, Russia each scheming full control. Mexicans lack spirit. The British hold fur, but fur will pass. Russians lack vision. Spence, the key to

empire is settlement. We must people the land, run up the flag and defy the world."

He kindled fires in men. Volunteers, deserting Willamette security, trekked south, east, north, peopling valleys, tilling bottomlands, stocking hills. A call went east for emigrants. Men were enjoined to work hard and make money against the inevitable test. This was Ewing Young's challenge. Now his rousing voice was stilled.

"Oregon Bubble," mourned Spence. "We dream and strive. Now, leaderless. . . ."

"Jason Lee's the new leader."

"Missionary," scoffed Spence. "We're not saving souls, Shane."

"Don't let that fool you, son. Jason's a fighter who thinks like Ewing did. He is drafting constitution and laws, determined to set up government against Columbia River one-man rule. A Yankee exploring squadron's anchored off Fort Vancouver. The British are worried but Commodore Wilkes advises Jason to go slow. Men of Columbia River have helped our settlers, says he. I particularly like Jason's answer."

"What was that, Shane?" This was news and Spence was starved for it.

"Jason replied that men should never fail to help brothers in distress. He said he'd exchange favors with men, groups or nations—but never at a cost of country. The commodore got mad but Jason gave him something to remember—a lesson in patriotism. Jason's young, vigorous and . . . and possibly a better leader than aging Ewing. I wish I had him along while I talk with Hugomont."

That roused Spence. "Hugomont? You're not going to Ross?"

"I'm fed up with Achille's ranch hirelings. Once he knows the facts, I'm satisfied he'll help me."

"Help?" Spence was amazed. "Sure, by jailing you and throwing the key

away. He knows your gripe. His men follow orders."

"No! I've found Hugomont himself to be a fair gentleman."

"Zeb didn't find him so, Shane. For God's sake, don't take this girl among his killer wolves."

"Sorry I cannot share your fear, Spence." His mind closed, Steelman moved to the cart, got in. "Make yourself at home at the ranch, and don't worry. I'll bring you good news. I have influence and I think I can convince Achille some of his own rascals killed and robbed poor Zeb, not you. Good bye. . . . and thanks"

He wheeled back, drove off swiftly. He didn't look back, though Aimee did once, briefly and without sign. Spence stared after them, prey to bleak thoughts. Nothing could have swayed the stubborn rancher. Nothing now could simplify an increasingly complex problem.

CHAPTER TWO

Flotsam of the Fur Brigade

SPENCE reached the Steelman Ranch as twilight faded. The Tahtoose families, taking the evening meal beside their fires outside mean brush wickiups, listened with stolid indifference while he explained his acceptance of Shane Steelman's invitation, silently watched him stride to the unlocked log house and enter.

By candle light, Spence laid a fire on the hearth and cooked a hearty supper. As he ate, he considered the strain he had sensed in the Tahtoose camp, a sullen taciturnity that was more than simple native shyness before a stranger. This, he thought, could be suspicion. But more likely it stemmed from fear. He had run across this before, among the coastal natives. Voices, unheard save by them, ran down the wind, telling them of trouble,

white man trouble, and to be avoided.

While he relaxed, full fed and growing drowsy, Spence dwelt upon their attitude. The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became. Something seemed to be warning him and, as one thought ran into another, he decided this house was not for him. Suppose Steelman, innocently enough perhaps, should reveal that the man Hugomont sought was at this ranch. Suppose Aimee, still prejudiced, should betray him. Suppose Hugomont sold them both on the idea that Spence actually had slain his partner.

A brief search turned up what Spence needed most—musket, powder horn and bullet pouch. Blowing out the candle, he caught up a couple of blankets and went out. Leading his horse, as if to picket it, he moved down toward the murmuring river. The Tahtoose camp was dark and silent. A half moon hung overhead and the sky was clear. The night was too peaceful. A thought halted Spence. Tahtoose dogs, wolfish when he rode in, were strangely silent. On hunch, he tied the pony and went to the wickiups. The Tahtoose were gone.

Fighting down worry, Spence returned to the horse and forded the river. On a hill opposite the ranch house, behind brush that hid him and the pony without restricting view, he spread his blankets and slept.

Early next morning he was awakened by sounds across the river. Through the first streaks of dawn he saw the glow from the Steelman door. Thinking it Shane and Aimee, he left the pony and waded the river. Nearing the door, he heard the voice. "It'd warsh down better with hot tea, eh boy?"

"You ain't lying'," came the food-choked reply. "But we dassent take time."

Gun ready, Spence approached. Through the open doorway he saw two men in greasy buckskins hunkered over bags of parched corn and sun-dried beef.

Gorging. He raised the gun, quickly lowering it. "Sunday!" he cried, eagerly. "Zeke!"

He popped inside. The pair recoiled, like boys caught stealing jam. They stared, yelled and then they were swarming over him, pummeling, voicing profane joy. When excitement abated, Spence sat watching them stuff themselves. Questions and answers flung back and forth.

Sunday Isom and Zeke Hopfavor, grizzled free trappers, had been members of the Henry-Ashley Brigade, in 1823. They had trapped with Jedediah Smith, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger and other fur gathering greats. They had fought Canucks and Indians, from Taos to Flathead House, from the Rockies to the Pacific, and many times they had spun their yarns in Spence's house, on the Willamette. They bore many wounds and had taken many scalps. They had seen the beaver dwindle, the great brigades decay. But still they trapped, doing the only thing they knew.

"We wintered in the Mendocinos," said Sunday, "with a feller name uh Kirby Kane. Fetched upwards uh sixty plews an' as many varmints—all we could rucksack out after redskins stole our mules. Me and Zeke was fer sellin' at Fort Vancouver. Kirby held out fer a higher price, from a feller name uh Hugomont, at Ross. . . ."

"Kirby run a sandy," broke in Zeke. "Sold us out to the Russians. They jumped us, shot us up an' taken out peltry. Me an' Sunday was lucky. . . ."

"Lost some blood an' damn near starved, follerin' them thieves with nary a gun or knife." Sunday took up the narrative. "Tend to yore vittles, Zeke; I'm tellin' this chapter. Kirby? That snake marches back with the Roosians, safe an' important."

"Cripes, this tastes good," mumbled Zeke. "Missed you on the Willamette, Spence. They said you was down here,

with Ol' Zeb Fine. How is the ringy badger?"

"Dead, boys. Murdered by Hugomont, who holds Ross. The Russians are gone."

"Zeb gone under?" Sunday stuffed his cheek with Steelman tobacco. "Gonna pay off?"

"One of us will. I just escaped Hugomont. Ate here last night and got a gun."

Zeke started. "Keerless of us, Sunday. Too hungry to look fer muskets." He caught up food, as if afraid of starving. Spence showed him Steelman's gun chest. They swore joyfully as they chose weapons. Strange sounds silenced them, drew them outside. The sun was up. Many-voiced melody drifted down the river. Far away echoes of shod hoofs against stone. "Who the hell's that?" Zeke was stiffly alert, edgy.

"Three guesses," taunted Spence. "Don't bother. It's our move."

"Hugomont's thieves!" rapped Sunday. "We kin bush up an' fight 'em . . . hey!" He cut off. Spence and Zeke were hurrying riverward. Grumbling, he hippered after them, limping from old wounds, a bearded scarecrow in filthy buckskins. They waded across and had only gained Spence's camp when twenty vaqueros splendidly mounted hodge-podge in Mexican velvet and leather, sitting high-horn saddles like centaurs. They had bottles and were drunk as they dismounted and went inside. Their laughter made Spence shudder. A band like this had called on Old Zeb.

After looting the house, they emerged, mounted and rode down the valley. Two remained behind, roaring ribald songs as they piled meadow hay from a stack against the buildings. Soon flames were roaring up the walls and the renegade pair were toasting the destruction with strong drink. The two old trappers complained bitterly when Spence would not permit them to fire. "It's some long for these

smooth bores," he argued. "And besides, you want to bring those others down on top of us? If I'm not mistaken, you'll get a belly full of shooting . . . maybe of lead."

"A cryin' shame," growled Sunday, "lettin' them two greasers burn down a good house filled with nice stuff, lettin' 'em live to gloat over it. Belly full uh shootin', eh? What you got on your mind, Wardlaw?"

"I think," said Spence, bleakly, "Shane Steelman and his pretty daughter are in bad trouble . . . maybe dead. Else why would Hugomont burn them out when always before he was content with warning? It looks bad."

"Too bad to let them reptiles git away," agreed Zeke. "Say the word an' I'll slip down, knife 'em an' take their ha'r."

Spence shook his head stubbornly, but the vaqueros themselves framed the answer. They were spurring away, curvetting their fractious ponies, shrilling wild yells as they waved cynical kisses to the burning buildings.

Nor was there any reason for Spence and his companions to desert their hideout when the men were gone. House and barn were flame-wrapped, doomed. Nothing they could do would suffice to save them. So they waited there. Zeke sprawled on Spence's blankets and was asleep instantly, worn out. Sunday nodded drowsily where he sat watching logs crumble to coals, coals to ashes. Spence brooded, deep in thoughts revolving around the late activities of the man Hugomont.

Then, suddenly, all three were awake, roused by a thunder of hoofbeats, shot through with the wild yells of the herders. Down the flats came mixed herd of spotted Mexican cattle and galloping mustangs of many colors. The Steelman herds. The vaqueros outrode the animals, swinging their lariats, yelling like demons and cutting back the bunch quitters.

As the excited creatures neared the fuming ruins of the buildings, the herders

galloped ahead, turning the leaders to the right, piling them up and sending them racing along the trace that, some miles westward, made junction with the road from Hugomont's Ranch to the old Fort Ross.

Echoes died to far, thin whispers. Spence and the trappers exchanged questioning glances. "A heap uh meat," mused Sunday. "Them cows alone will take plenty eatin', not countin' the ponies. Somebody must be hoardin' ag'in' a famine."

"Fort Ross bound," added Zeke. "Why you reckon Hugomont wants them ponies?"

Spence grunted. "No use guessin', boys. What interests me is they don't fear meetin' Steelman. Let's see if they missed two ponies you boys can ride. Might be somebody at Hugomont's ranch we can pressure the truth from. Wait here."

He mounted and rode up the flats, long gun thonged to his saddle, pistols belted for instant use. Poising the lariat found on his saddle, he worked the brushy meadow fringes along Russian River. Presently he kicked out a frightened fugitive mustang, worked it into the clear and noosed it. Two hours later, he rejoined the trappers, leading a pair of subdued ponies by the severed halves of his raw-hide rope.

Fashioning hackamores, the trappers mounted bareback, took ten minutes of punishing combat, and followed Spence down river. Hugomont's Ranch, an imposing establishment, proved to be deserted. Recalling the ruin of Steelman's place, the three busied themselves with fire. When they departed, buildings, haystacks and corrals were spiraling flame and smoke skyward.

Spence and his two hard-bitten old frontier compadres moved away from the raging inferno, on Spence's face there was a look of grim satisfaction.

CHAPTER THREE

Martial Tread at Fort Ross

IN THE dark hour preceding moonrise, Spence and his companions drew rein at the crest giving down to Fort Ross. Haze dimmed the stars. Phosphorescence lit the breaking sea. Driftwood beach fires revealed a large vessel offshore, her tall spars waving. Torches flickered on her decks, showing men busy loading long-boats. On the water, oars flashed where loaded boats drove shoreward and empty ones returned. Stores were piled high near the blazing fires.

"Supply ship," said Spence. "What's Hugomont doing with all that stuff?"

"Mought be gonna outfit fur brigades," allowed Zeke.

"Hogwash!" Sunday spat. "Any dummy knows better'n that. Fur's skeerce. A brigade'd starve. Mebby we better look. Mought meet Kirby. I wanta hear him squeal when my knife pricks his neck."

"I've got to find Steelman," said Spence. "Come on."

"Steelman?" Sunday chuckled as they rode down the slope. "Or his daughter?"

Spence didn't answer, for Sunday was right. He was thinking of the girl, fearing for her. At the foot of the slope, they tied the animals and went ahead on foot. From the surf came the melodious chanting of oarsmen. "French," muttered Sunday. "They're singin' French."

The round fort lay dark. But nearer buildings were brilliantly lighted, noisy with laughter and song. Drawn to the nearest of these places, the interlopers peered between golden draperies into the one-time council room of Russian governors. What they saw astonished them. Glittering chandeliers lighting a groaning table. Georgian linen. Silver service from Sevastapol. Smoking haunches of venison. Stuffed geese and cygnets. Rare wines. Luxury and magnificence uncom-

pling beside those who sat there feasted.

Hugomont presided—ornate in velvet and lace, adorned with medals and sword. None of his lieutenants was present. Along one side ranged dazzling Hussars, facing ranking naval officers. Opposite Hugomont stood the ship's captain, speaking swiftly, proposing a toast to Hugomont. All rose, roaring it, draining glasses.

"I swow!" rapped Sunday. "French warship. Soldiers. Toastin' Marie Achille Hugomont, Marshal an' Governor of New France. Savvy about them ponies now, Spence?"

"Quiet!" Spence drew them back as Hugomont began his speech. "This is a French *coup*, boys. Seizing Oregon while Mexico, England and Russia exchange notes. Let's look further." He led them through shadows to another long house noisy with ribaldry. Here, with liquor flowing lavishly, they spotted Gifford and Janece, Caton Fabre and Kirby Kane, the treacherous trapline man. The room swarmed with drunken sailors and cavalymen and Spence shuddered, thinking of Aimee. "All celebrating," he said, "except maybe a few guards. I'm looking in the fort jail for Steelman."

"Risky," warned Zebe, "but likely fun. Another hour an' they'll be so pickled we can walk in an' drag out that dog, Kirby. Lead out, Spence."

Spence kept in the shadows to the fort wall, followed it, under jutting Russian cannon, and neared the gate. He paused, sniffing tobacco smoke. A guard, unseen but dangerous! They could not risk a general alarm. Spence was weighing a problem that could mean life or death to them when Sunday, with fur-brigadier recklessness, snorted: "Hell! I'll pelt the varmint!"

Spence clutched missed. "Wait Sunday." But the trapper, silent as blown ash, blended with the gloom. They saw no more of him, heard less, until he

called: "C'mon!" They found him inside the gate, grinning, puffing a strange pipe. "No guard here," he chuckled. "But one at yon end looks lonely. Care to cheer him up, Zeke?"

"Why not, pardner? I got somethin' here that'll tickle his fleece."

He glided away, skinning knife bared. Spence grinned, shrugged. "Watch this gate, Sunday," he said, and turned along the arcade toward a bright pane—only light in the fort. That pane, opaque oil-skin, offered nothing so Spence tried the door, pushed it inward and closed it after him. The comfortable furnished room was empty. Hand on his gun, Spence called: "Anybody home?" A step. The inner doorway framed a woman.

Aimee Steelman looked more the woman, less the girl. She was prettied, her dark hair rolled high, rouge on her full lips. She wore a pale rose robe of Chinese silk that pointed up the sudden paling of her cheeks. "You?" she gasped. "What do you want here?"

"Where's your father, Aimee?"

"He's not here. He wouldn't see you if he was. Hugomont offers a reward. . . ."

"I know, Aimee." Annoyance touched Spence. "Where's your father?"

"He . . . he's on the supply boat. Seeing the captain about passage. Now if you. . . ."

Spence felt a pang. "Passage? You're going away?"

"Father sold the ranch. We're sailing east, around the Horn."

"No?" Spence thought he knew about that sale. Held in the spell of her loveliness, he silently damned Hugomont. Aimee must be told. Would she listen. "The captain is feasting, drinking with Hugomont," he began marshalling arguments. "Your supply boat is a French warship, loaded with troops. We're only pawns in an empire grab. . . ."

Impatiently, she quit the doorway,

moved to a chair, sat down. Watching her, Spence despaired of making her see . . . in time. "*Ver' interesting, M'sieu'!*" The taunt came from the portal she had quitted. Spence whirled. Hugomont's Caton Fabre stood there in the uniform of a French Marine, his pistol cocked, leveled. "I come for Ma'mselle, so M'sieu' le Gouverneur may present her to his officers. Voila! I fine 'ere the Fox of Benediction Bay—ten thousand francs afoot. You learn and talk much. You are an enemy of New France. I carry out the death sentence of his Excellency—Le Gouverneur. Turn around, M'sieu'."

Spence had no out. Fabre had only to drop the flint. "Sure, Caton," he said. "I won't be the first you've shot in the back." He began his turn. Aimee rose, protesting.

"No! Not . . . not that."

Fabre's belly shook. "Why not, beautiful one?"

Aimee could not answer. Spence, shoulder to Fabre, snatched and spun, pivoting from the assassin's line of aim. The knife, from Steelman's armory, was in his hand. His extended arm gave him terrific leverage, nor had he forgotten lessons learned from Zeb Fine—master of the Aleut spear. A scintillant blade, swifter than a trigger pull, flashing to its target. Fabre, struck fatally above the heart, doubled in agony, drew his arm in. The gun report was muffled against his body. He tumbled, sprawling face down, silent, unmoving. And Aimee was swaying, stifling a scream. "You killed him."

"Naturally," he said, coldly. "Get outside!"

"No!" She said stubbornly. "What are you going to do?"

"Outside!" He spun her toward the door, doused the light and followed her out. Holding her arm, he drew her along the arcade, suddenly pausing, listening.

"Now you'll get it," she snapped. "Somebody's coming."

"Shut up! Stop talking!" Spence drew a pistol. Zeke Hopfavor came hurrying.

"War that a shot, Spence? Or war it a shutter slammin'? What happened?"

"You boys let trouble through, Zeke."

"We did? Sorry, but I reckon you taken keer of it, eh? That was one stubborn hombre guardin' yon end. All's clear. What next?"

"Stand by. Warn me if anybody comes. Aimee, let's see if we can find your father." He led her down to the bleak, windowless cubicle where he had lain behind bars. He entered, pulling her inside, shutting out all light. He called: "Shane!"

"Yes?" Sleepily. "Who's that?"

"Dad!" Aimee flung forward, bumping the bars. "What is it, dad?" You said you were going to the ship but they've got you here. . . ."

"Caged like a squirrel," rapped Steelman, with a rebirth of spirit. "Sentenced to be shot in the morning. Who's with you, daughter? Was that. . . ."

"Wardlaw," said Spence. "I've got to get you out. . . ."

A moan of inner agony came from the rancher. "I . . . I'm sorry about talking to you like I did. Hugomont is all you said, and more. He accused me of treachery to the state, fined me everything I have on earth and sentenced me to be shot at sunup."

"The French state," added Spence.

"I know," muttered Steelman. "He gloated and told me everything, believing I'd never live to repeat it. An astounding conspiracy, Spence. He's an agent for Louis Napoleon—Bonaparte's nephew—who has failed in two short revolts and is now in some French prison. The idea is to release him and make him emperor of France. If that does not succeed, the plan is to spirit him over here, where Hugomont will have seized a foothold, drive out the British, Mexicans and Yankees and build a vast new empire. He counts on help from the Montreal Ca-

nucks and French nationals in the United States. What can we do, Spence? Ewing Young never counted on this. Oh, if he was only alive."

"First," said Spence, feeling for the lock, "I must get you out of here."

"Quick, Spence," breathed Aimee, and it was the first time she had ever called his name, or acted humble before him. "Do something. I'll help. . . ."

"There's flint and steel on the table yonder," gruffed Steelman. "The key's hanging on a hook in the front wall."

Spence made a light, found the key and let Shane out. He armed father and daughter from a handy gun rack and, carrying an extra supply of powder and ball, extinguished the light and led the way out. They hadn't taken a dozen steps toward the gate when a tumult broke out at the guardhouse.

Spence halted and they stood there listening, frozen with apprehension, fearing the worst. A single shot, sending echoes rocketing through the fort. Sound of the heavy log gate slamming. A volley of gun bursts and the raucous chorusing of excited men. Echoes of running feet under the arcade. "Spence! Spence!"

Sunday and Zeke came speeding. "A squad uh them soup eaters come to change the guard," explained Sunday. "I tried to fool 'em, argyin' Hugomont had cancelled the idee. My French was too rusty. A Huissier shot at me. I killed him. They opened up. We got the gate shut. Hell's afloat now. Hit the catwalk. Zeke; we'll warm our irons."

Like monkeys, they hit the ladder. Outside, men were roaring questions, answering them. The church bells rang frantically. Spence, disregarding Steelman's, "Looks bad for us", turned Aimee back.

"Better get inside, girl. Lie flat, in case bullets fly. Up the ladder. Shane. I'm behind you. We've got to keep them off the walls."

Aimee flung about. "Don't order me, Spence Wardlaw! Where dad goes, I go. I can load and shoot and we're short handed enough, Heaven knows." She darted to the ladder, up which Steelman climbed, chuckling. Spence came last, admiring her spirit if not her temper. Like a fractious colt, she'd need a steady hand on the rein. What kind of a man would it take? How much punishment would she deal out before taming down?

ACROSS the parapet, Spence glimpsed panic. Against the glow of lighted buildings, men scurried aimlessly, like aroused ants. Alarmed and confused. Befuddled by drink. Wasting precious moments during which a frail threat could have been crushed.

On the ship, winches no longer squealed. Torches were motionless as sailors listened, wondered. On the water, weary oarsmen poised their blades, puzzling. A guard squad belabored the gate, stupidly demanding entrance.

Scanning the parapet, Spence found Sunday and Zeke posted, alert, calm as if fleshing hides. To Steelman, he said: "Take the gate end, Shane. Hold fire till they bust in, then come here. Then we'll take over and make them dig us out."

Shane grunted, patted Aimee's arm and departed, grudgingly. His fighting days were behind him but Spence knew he'd battle like hell if crowded. "Like Old Zeb," he muttered, and to Aimee, "Fill in for Zeb, down yonder," he said. "He'd have kicked that it was the place of least danger, but. . . ."

"Zeb?"

"Tell you about him sometime. Never doubt his fighting ghost will be beside you if only to admire your . . . oh, you're so confoundingly pretty, Aimee."

She stood there, tall, fearless, searching his shadowed face. "I . . . I hated you, Spence," she confessed. "I was wrong. I'm sorry for what I said." She didn't

turn, just stood awaiting his answer, her eyes unexpectedly challenging. Between them came the constraint of words withheld, emotion throbbing fiercely.

Hoarsely, Spence said: "I never dared hope a girl like you would keep my cabin."

"Is the thought so painful now, Spence?"

She came into his arms, her lips fervent against his. Then, recalling the grim menace of the moment, she broke free, hurried to her post. Spence watched her strong, free stride, sighing, then turned to a cannon, withdrawing the heavy tarpaulin, verifying load and priming. He shifted the trunnion cradle, set the pin. He spun the elevating worm, dusted powder in the fuse groove, took a last quick look around the barrel. His flint and steel struck a spark. Powder flamed along the groove. His fear of a misfire was vain. The catwalk trembled. Concussion tore at his ears. Fire ran from the cannon and smoke half obscured the target.

Through acrid fumes, Spence saw the Russ council chamber buckle, erupt debris skyward. The roof sagged slowly, tumbled in. The walls fell and fire crept sullenly through the wreckage. Echoes ran and died. Smoke dissipated. A breathless hush was broken by frantic screams for help. Men came crawling from the ruin. Others raced to help those trapped there.

Flame soon drove would-be rescuers back. In their glow, ship's officers raced to board the vessel. Pounding on the fort gate had ceased. Sailors, at their long-boats, were stunned. Spence's shot had brought utter confusion. There was no time to dally.

Spence glanced along the catwalk. Steelman stood frozen with astonishment, Aimee screamed something joyful. The trappers following suit, were baring other cannons.

"Save those loads!" Spence roared at them. "We'll need them later." Knotting

a lash line around the trunnion, Spence let himself over the wall, descending hand over hand. From the shadow of the wall, he saw carousers emerge from the grog room and reel toward the beach. Doubtful of how many remained and with small hope of finding those he sought, he sped unnoticed across open ground in the first light of the rising moon.

In the drinking room, improvised for the entertainment of French soldiers and sailors, Jairus Gifford and Dolph Janece sat with half-emptied bottles, startled by the sudden outburst of shots and yells, the ground-shaking *boom* of the cannon, the shrieks and confusion around the doomed banquet hall. Fear twisted their faces, and puzzlement, as there was a sudden rush of uniformed men, reeling, staggering, stumbling and cursing, milling swiftly from the place.

"What's that?" demanded Janece, a chunky, solid-built man who habitually strutted.

Gifford, a gaunt, hungry looking fellow with dark circled and deeply sunken eyes, moistened his lips, shaking his head dumbly. "Drunken fools," he mumbled, his tongue thick from an overload of rum. "Some of them wild Hussars has barged into the fort an' set off a cannon. Sounds like the guards is shootin' 'em down."

Janece stood up, clinging to the table's edge. "Hell's loose, sure enough, Giff. You don't suppose Steelman's out of his cell. Suppose Spence Wardlaw sneaked in an' let him loose. . . ."

Gifford laughed. "Set down; you're shakin' like you got the delerium trimmin's. I allus said you can't hold likker, Dolph. You ortn't ever touch the stuff. Supposin' Steelman is loose? Supposin' Wardlaw's with him? So what? What kin two men do here? It's some of them drunkin' *parle vous* boys, playin' cute games."

"Whichever it is, Giff, we oughta be out there. . . ."

"Set down! You know Hugomont. He's gonna flay somebody alive for this. If we are here, quiet drinkin' an mindin' our business, he can't take out his anger on us. Set down."

JANEECE hesitated, caution and recklessness clashing in him. Now he straightened, set his jaw. "I'm takin' a look-see," he growled and set a course for a side door, weaving precariously. Gifford watched him, his eyes smoking. Then, as the door closed behind his partner, he laughed, shrugged and reached for Janeece's bottle.

"More for me," he chuckled, poured a drink. He set down the glass, wiped his lips on the back of his hand. A faint sound drew his glance. His eyes widened. There, framed in the front entrance, stood Spence Wardlaw.

When Spence entered the place, his eyes took in the scene, missing nothing. He saw Gifford gulping a drink. He saw a few more, soldiers and sailors, slumbering on the floor or at the tables—dead drunk. He saw barrels of bottles standing untended behind a makeshift serving counter. That was all. The once full room had almost emptied at the call of excitement and curiosity. And now Gifford's eyes were on him and he was coming to his feet, shaking his head as if to clear his brain of hallucinations. "Damn my eternal soul!" His voice echoed hollowly.

Spence stepped slowly toward him. "That's already damned, Gifford. I'm here to damn the rest of you. You're standing before me in trial, like I stood before you and Hugomont and the other renegade rats. I've found you guilty, sentenced you to die. Not as you saw Old Zeb Fine die—without a chance, but with a pistol in your fist and my bullet in your guts. Don't stand there. Pull and fire, fall and bleed till you die."

Gifford frowned. He smiled. He sneered

and he twisted, listening, as emotions paraded through his drink clouded consciousness. He was sobering fast and slyness was pervading his eyes, which flicked nervously toward the entrance. "Then it was you?" he muttered. "Janeece was right. Hugomont's wanted you bad, feller, an' you walk in an' save us heaps of trouble runnin' you down." His poise was returning, his confidence and cruelty. "As for that old goat—Zeb, he had his chance. He just wasn't fast enough."

"He was a crippled up old man," said Spence. "He was shot in the back, Fabre told me so. You murdered him, Gifford. You're killing time, hoping somebody will come in to stop this. But they're too interested in what goes on outside. It's you and me, Gifford. If you won't draw; if you rat on me, I'll drop you kicking—as you dropped Zeb."

Gifford laughed and turned to the door through which Janeece had quit the room. Offering Spence his back. Betting his life on Spence's innate decency. It was a safe bet too. Spence could not have shot him from behind, but some hunch, some instinct grounded upon a knowledge of treachery, sent his hand to his gun. And Gifford was moving explosively, spinning, drawing, shooting, eyes burning, teeth bared, face as thin and bony as a death head. Thus Spence saw him, before gunsmoke hazed his figure and concussion rocked the place.

Lead burned along Spence's left side, inches from his heart. Gifford was going down. And from behind Spence, at the door, came an echoing step and a vengeful: "Hey! You shot my pardner, you son of a dog!"

Spence spun as a shot burned past him. But as Gifford had said, Janeece could not handle his liquor. He was drunk and he missed and Spence was reaching for his second pistol, knowing that Janeece held a revolver and that his second and less hurried shot wouldn't miss. Desperately

Spence lifted and swung the gun at his belt. Before he could fire it, before Janeece's weapon spat fire, an unkempt figure flashed across the threshold, a gun up-lifted, swinging down. Crash of splintering bone as Sunday Isom's gun muzzle sank into Janeece's skull, dropping him. The big trapper came leaping across the falling body, scolding.

"You damned reckless young fool! Don't you know . . . ?" He paused, silencing, looking down at the sinister face of Jairus Gifford, contorted in death. Then his arms were around Spence in a great bear hug. "You done 'er, son. You killed the deadliest shot an' the most treacherous snake British Fur ever turned loose to rob the cubbies of Yankee trappers. I just met Kirby Kane out yonder. Done right well he did, till he went under. They're after me. Come on; let's git outa this."

He gave Spence a shove and together they raced out the side door. A sailor rose at one of the tables, stood weaving before Spence, his *poignard* uplifted menacingly. Spence struck him in the chin, felling him. The knife skittered across the puncheon floor. Spence stooped for it and went smashing outside, Sunday at his heels, as pursuit roared in the front.

Spence's view of the compound as he popped outside was one of violently aroused men, darting aimlessly, yelling hoarse injunctions—each man for himself. That changed as a handful of sailors came barging around the building, swinging cutlasses. Spence and Sunday wheeled away from them, met another group roaring from the other way. Narrowly avoiding the sweeping blade of the leader, Spence swerved and went charging toward the burning banquet hall. Veering slightly toward the hill, with the aging trapper blowing like a porpoise as he struggled to keep up. Swiftmess of foot was all now that they could depend on. And pursuit was swift.

When it seemed they could not escape, the scene shifted again. A vast fusillade chattered. Spence saw spiteful muzzle flares, heard unseen men yelling and a heavy, commanding voice rallying, directing them. He glimpsed Hugomont, magnificent in braid, waving a sword, then lost him in a tangle of combat. Gunblasts. Cries. Hoofbeats. Horsemen, charging savagely, came with darting lances. A war cry! "*Viva Mexico!*"

CHAPTER FOUR

"Yankee Ships!"

CRIES, guns, plunging horses and pennoned lances—these discouraged those pursuing Spence and Sunday. They veered, slanting toward the beach. Mexican dragoons, hacking through scattering freebooters, spotted the two Americans in the moonlight, rode at them. *Out of the frying pan into . . .*

Too spent to beat horses into the timber, Spence hesitated. Captive ponies, breaking from a corral to the north, stampeded before the dragoons. Spence grabbed Sunday. "The grog room. Come on!"

"Wait!" Sunday resisted. "I'll *habla* these fellers."

The ponies slanted up the slope, heading for home pastures on Russian River. The dragoons advanced, halting as Sunday ran toward them, waving his arms, yelling bastard Spanish. A challenge rang and was answered. A cry flung back and from the timber came a coach drawn by four small mules. A rotund, baldish man stepped out.

"Vot gifs mit der shooting?" he demanded.

Hitting the high points, Spence told what he knew of Hugomont's conspiracy. The little man swelled. "Filibusters! Renegades! Dumkopfs! Louis Napoleon . . . bah! Iss Mexico asleep? *Nein.*"

Against der Englishers und Roosians, I build New Helvetia und maintain soldiers. Der Roosians I buy oudt. Englishers respect mine authority. But these . . . these pigs. . . ." He barked orders in guttural Spanish, then, "Mexico iss grateful, mine friends, for resisting dese pirates. I come to take cattle, horses und cannon to New Helvetia, but first ve sink dot ship. To der fort."

"Fort's closed," said Spence. "I'll open it for you." He sped away, marvelling at Sutter. Seven years out of Switzerland, three years ago an Oregon emigrant, he now owned ten million square *varas* of fruitful land, fort, mill, tannery and distillery. And now—Fort Ross. Hawaiians worked his vast fields. His sawmills cut lumber for his shipyard and for Yerba Buena. Rich, hospitable, he entertained soldiers, trappers, diplomats and dignitaries at his Sacramento *hacienda*. Why should he risk his neck for stock he didn't need, and cannon he might never use? Even the great could play the fool.

Reaching his dangling rope, Spence glanced back. The settlement was peaceful, only a few shapless forms attesting the conflict. Dragoons escorted the coach slowly toward the gate. Down the hill road came huge wagons, their brakes squealing. Into this peace struck sounds that froze Spence. Sunday Isom, hurrying back to his post, halted. From the beach came a trumpet note. The earth trembled. Crash of rending timbers. A roundshot blasted through the log walls, struck the earth and moaned into the pines.

Knocked flat, Spence heard Sutter's orders, saw dragoons fan out and charge. A savage chorus from the beach, where freebooters rushed to man the breach. Picking himself up unharmed, Spence caught Sunday's shout, saw him vanish through the wrecked wall. Spence leaped after him. If Hugomont took the fort, with the ship backing him, nothing could retrieve it.

Ducking through a shattered room and onto the arcade, Spence winced as another ball ripped the parapet, clipping the catwalk and hurting through the settlement. Shuddering at such power, Spence ran to the gate, flung it wide. Sutter's coach veered through, the driver lashing the mules. Holding the gate open, Spence saw the dragoon charge split by flaming Hussar muskets. Horsemen and their mounts tumbled. Some reached for their saddle-guns, but not to use them. They were caught foul, raked murderously. Another ball wreaked havoc within the fort.

The dragoons broke, whirling back. Space yelled, waving them inside. Badly mauled, they swept through, leaving half their number on the field. Spence barred the gate. Sutter was busy, cheering his panicked men, posting them at the breaches with their musketoon. Spence climbed to the catwalk, drawing his first long breath as Aimee ran toward him, calling. "Spence! Spence, I feared you were. . . ."

He caught her, held her, smoothing back her hair. "Steady, darling. We'll hold them off. Be a good girl and quit the catwalk. Get into your room and lie flat till firing dies down. Please."

Refusal trembled on her tongue. Then, knowing the fear in his eyes was for her, she whispered: "Careful, my dear", kissed him, patted his cheek and obediently descended. Spence glanced at the ship, broadside now, saw the flash and ducked. Hurling iron struck the fort, tearing, splintering.

Across the compound, Sunday and Zeke were lining a cannon. Before Spence could join them, they fired the priming. The old piece spoke thunderously. The aim was low, wide. The ball skipped twice and plunged into the sea. Derision rocketed from the vessel's decks. "Not so good," Spence chided. "Maybe Sutter's got somebody who savvies."

The trappers swore, glowering at war-

rions landing unchallenged through the surf. There was firing at the gate and below, where dragoons disputed attackers in the breach. Shane Steelman came running. "They've rigged a ram," he yelled. "I can't shoot fast enough. Gotta have help."

They ran back with him and, under fire, turned their muskets on the freebooters. Two firing while two reloaded. Two fell. Others replaced them. Two more went down as the gate shuddered. The log fell. Deadly fire took toll of two more. The Hussars fled for cover, abandoning the ram.

Another roundshot ripped the fort as Sutter came searching for Spence. "Ve hold dem at the breach," he cried, "but ve must sink der verdamft ship."

"Got anybody who can aim and fire cannons?" asked Spence.

"Yah." Sutter eyed the tarpaulined guns. "But powder und ball? Ve need powder und ball. Vere iss der armory?"

"I don't know."

"I search, mine friendt. I find oudt." He hurried away.

Sunday sniffed disdainfully. "Just smelled a nasty idea, Spence. If we want powder, we'll likely have to get it off the beach. Nice prospect, eh?"

"Damned old killjoy," snorted Spence, and froze as a muffled scream touched his ears. He whirled, straining for a repetition. If it came, another smashing roundshot blotted it out. Lips while, Spence went down the ladder, raced across the compound and smashed into the room where he had first found Aimee.

Some faint warning ran along Spence's nerves as he hit that doorway, something that retarded his rush and left him lagging behind the flashing swing of the panel. A bullet burned past him, splintering the jamb. Aimee screamed a warning. Pistol leveled, Spence entered that smoke-dim room, saw Aimee's strained face and terrified eyes. Behind her leered Achille

Hugomont, who risked an empire for a beautiful girl's favor.

Hugomont's eyes blazed madness. His strong arms held Aimee helpless before him. The empty, smoking pistol dangled in his hand. "A brave dream, Hugomont," Spence taunted. "Included everything you wanted, didn't it? You reach for a girl who despises you, turning the dream into a nightmare."

Almost amiable, Hugomont's laugh. "Sometimes, M sieu', I almost like you. What courage. What *sang froid*. What scorn of odds. You should be with me instead of Sutter's chicken-hearted dragoons, but. . . ." He dropped the gun and his sword flashed out. "Admiring you, *mon imbecile vaillant*, I spare you. Retire and die for the stupid Swiss."

Aimee struggled vainly and Spence said: "Don't fight, girl. Hugomont, it's no use. I'm moving up to put a ball through your sword arm, unless you. . . ."

"*Bien, mon enfant*. I save my Hussars the trouble of killing you." Reading indomitable purpose here, Hugomont's tone changed. "One step more, fool, and she dies!"

It halted Spence. "The brave Marshal fights women now. Put her aside, Hugomont. Drop your sword. I'll drop the gun. Then we can settle it with knives."

"Knives? Why should I fight a Yankee criminal? Parbleu, I live to destroy your kind. No Yankee shall see king Louis claim his empire. . . ."

"Nor anybody else, Hugomont."

"*Vive le Roi! Vive le Empereur!*" Hugomont's shout drowned sounds of conflict.

Untouched by his fanaticism, Spence dared not jeopardize Aimee. Fearing the pistol, Hugomont was content to wait, certain the defenders could last little longer. The pantomine held, none speaking. Hate-filled yells heightened at the breach. Firing swelled. It happen then.

The room seemed to disintegrate. Ter-

rific impact shuddered the walls. Smashing crashing, splintering doom! Spence, hurled bodily, struck the wall. His senses ebbed. After an aeon of agonizing doubt, his brain cleared. He heaved off debris and came up. The place was a shambles. He couldn't see Aimee but there was Hugomont, bloody faced, swordless, clawing out and up. Noting Spence, he shrugged fatalistically.

"Fate decides, M'sieu'. *Voila!* I accept the challenge." He leaped forward, long knife gleaming, face a bruised mask in the pallid dawnlight.

Spence's gun was missing but his knife was in its sheath. He drew it now, cuddling it point forward on his palm, bracing against Hugomont's charge. He could easily have impaled the man, would have some lesser foe. But this was for Old Zeb.

Spence was smiling as Hugomont closed, thrusting. Blades singing, ringing. The two men locked, strained, and it wasn't Spence who lost his smile. Hugomont was strong but now he was at grips with muscles of twisted steel, forged in wearying surf battles, tempered in the whiplash handling of Aleut spears.

Hugomont broke, backed a step, then attacked fiercely, using every trick. Spence was busy, weaving, parrying, until fooled by a swift feint, he felt the steel score his left arm and breast. Recoiling from death so narrowly missed, he saw the opening. Sensing a kill, Hugomont flashed in, stabbing. Spence swerved and struck—a looping upward sweep of blade that found Hugomont's belly, hilt deep.

Withdrawing, Spence parried the counter stroke, caught and held Hugomont's knife arm. "Understand," he hissed, "that this was for Zeb Fine, not against Napoleon." The man clung to him, heaving, his face grey, eyes agonized, fight lost. He showed no fear, only regret of a gambler who has staked and lost; of a dreamer denied the solacing substance of his vision;

of a leader whose followers, denied his genius, must lose.

"M'sieu'," he was weakly courteous. "Killing me I forgive, but never your wounding New France." His eyes closed. He sagged. "*Vive le Roi! Mon Empereur . . . adieu!*"

His throat rattled. Spence let him fall and called Aimee. He found her buried by debris, half conscious. A cruel bruise on her forehead. She clutched at him, sobbing against his breast. His blood frightened her. "You . . . you're hurt?"

"I'll live over it, honey. You?"

"Something hit me. I . . ." she shook her head. "I can't remember, Oh . . . Hugomont! Where is he?"

"Dead, Aimee."

"That awful man . . . dead. God must have hated him too, Spence." She sobbed again. Spence, hearing the swelling tumult, said: "I'm needed, honey. Lie quietly till I come back. . . ."

"What if you don't come back, Spence?"

"I will, honey." He kissed her, searched till he found his fallen pistol and got the door open. In the dawnlight, the compound was a writhing maelstrom of battling men. Freebooters had forced the breach! The dragoons, outnumbered and without powder, still battled—with lances, clubbed guns, fists, anything. But they were losing, falling back. Up on the catwalk, Sunday and Zeke and Shane Steelman lay side by side, firing down, ramming home charges and firing again. Never missing, they were too few to sway the issue, one way or another.

While Spence stood in the doorway, uncertain as to what part he could play, he heard a yell. From a doorway adjoining the cell house came General Sutter. He was flushed of face, carrying a heavy bag. Behind him came two dragoons, also carrying bags. He fell silent and stopped short, noting the plight of his men. Then he bawled: "Powder the ball! Powder und

GUNS OF THE GOLDEN EMPIRE

ball for dose *swinehunds*. Come get it."

But the dragoons were fated never to use his find. It was too late. Hussars rushed toward him. Spence used his last shot to kill the leader. Then, unarmed, he ran to the ladder and went to the catwalk for the musket he had abandoned. Shots were hurled at him. A bullet clipped him in the side, spinning him around. Holding his feet, he sprinted, leaped a gap in the walkway and sped to join Shane and the trappers. Trumpets were crying from the ship. Yells of warning flung across the water, were picked up and relayed into the fort. Firing died away, men listening. Then the freebooters had spun and were racing out through the breach, abandoning the fight.

They were vulnerable at that moment but astonishment chained the defenders. It made no sense, except to Spence—the only man looking across the parapet. He saw men at the longboats, feverishly waving their fleeing comrades to greater speed. He saw the hysterical activity on the ship, as men swarmed into the rigging, getting up sail, as others warped the vessel around and heaved on the anchor. He saw a deck gun spit flame, sending a ball dancing outward toward the point jutting into the sea. Then he knew, and knowledge fired his soul.

"Ships!" He split his lungs. "Yankee ships standing in!"

It brought Sunday and Zeke and Shane Steelman erect and to the paratet. General Sutter came up the ladder like a monkey. Weary, brutally battered dragoons somehow found their way onto the catwalk. Bloodshot eyes staring toward the point, where vapor wisps blew in across the ocean's breast. There, like grey ghosts, came a squadron of ships, creeping slowly as their sails took the gentle breeze. From their tall spars flew the stars and stripes of the United States of America.

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From the throats of those lining the ball-scarred bulwark rose yells of joy—yells cut off as the freebooters sent another roundshot seaward. A gun flamed on the forward deck of the leading American ship, the ball hitting the water alongside the freebooter. The French tricolor danced up on the halyard and there was no more firing. The Frenchman caught the wind and moved away, leaving the desperately hurried longboats to a forever unreported fate.

The freebooter got away to the south, the American letting her go and anchoring about three miles out, their decks stripped for action. It was like a miracle to most of the defenders, men who had



escaped slaughter by the narrowest of margins. But to Spence, it was destiny, the fruiting of the vision of Ewing Young—the empire dreamer. He had sent men out to people the wilderness, foreseeing just such a test as this. Without such men as Zeb Fine, Shane Steelman, Sunday Isom and Zeke Hopfavor, Hugomont's dream would be very much a reality. There was a long way to go, much to be done, but some day. . . .

Spence Wardlaw's step was light and he was smiling happily as he sped to bring Aimee up to see the American Exploring Squadron, to thrill with him as the ensign of Commodore Wilkes danced shoreward across the swells.

THE END

QUEEN OF THE HIGH CRAGS

(Continued from page 80)

ing and rolling himself off the lip of the ledge to go falling on the wider one with the feist twenty feet below. The yells that came up now meant nothing to a bear:

"Get me away from here! My leg's broken! Get me down from here! For God's sake get me down and back to town for a doctor! Get me down! Get me! Get me!"

The voice trailed off into a wild fit of sobbing and wailing. That, too, meant nothing. It meant nothing until old Mamook saw men carrying the limp man back to the horses below. After that, keeping herself out of sight, she watched men, horses and dogs going away, a great, gentle calm beginning to settle on the slopes of Old Baldy.

Porky was still the apple of the mother eye. Limping, stopping here and there to lick her wound and bear-cry a little about it, it took almost an hour to find the cub. When she came upon him he was on the north side of the slopes, down at another sea of old gopher dens.

Mamook gave her wound, one that would soon heal, another careful lick, and then sat back on her rump to stare, a strange, half-soft light of understanding



beginning to dawn in the little-pig bear eyes. For the first time in his lazy life, Porky was turning over the broad, flat stones, spitting here and spitting there, deeply engaged in the wonderful bear-art of finding his own breakfast.

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(Continued from page 91)

"You got to put him off, boy!"

Dreamlike and without reason, it was Billy Robbins' voice. For one tenth of a second Allan Shafer paused, his eyes running automatically to the door of the bedroom where Robbins sagged against the jamb. But Curt did not look around and his guns exploded together, smashing home the impact of leaden slug as Shafer's bullet tore its way through the plastered thickness of the wall beyond.

"WELL, Curt boy," Billy Robbins stood in the dust beside the Concord coach, looking up at Curt Graber on the high perch of the driver's seat. "You can tell them down-Bay that they can have



the whole Danger Belle, if they want to pay the price."

Curt grinned down at the little man. "Fort and all, Billy? Or are you going to try taking over where Kinkead left off?"

"Don't reckon we'll need a fort here on the mountain no more." Billy gestured toward the high spire of Sun Mountain that raised above the town, and the great twenty-foot breadth of stars and stripes that whipped there in the wind.

"If there's going to be a fight, boy, they'll find we're ready here on the Lode. Bullion, bullets and buckos! We've got 'em all and we're rarin' to go!"



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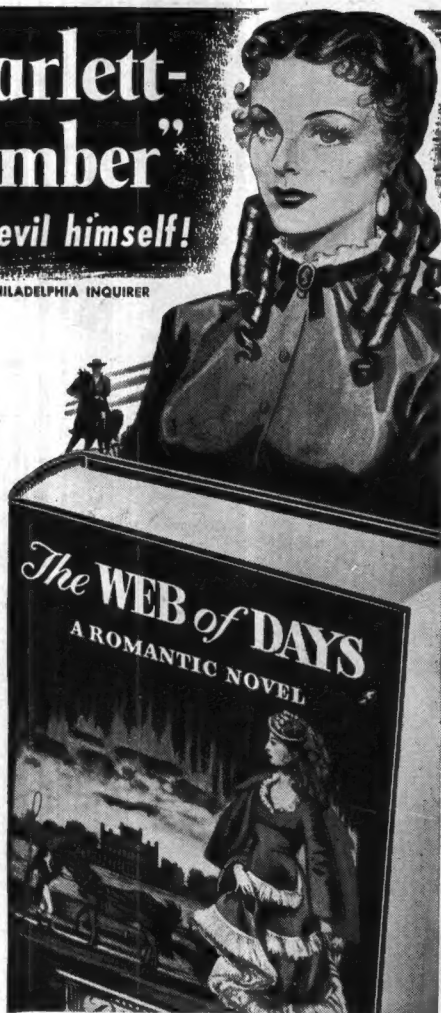
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overseer's house threatened Hester with "conjur."

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